

BEYOND GRIMM

EDITED BY
DEBORAH J. ROSS AND PHYLLIS IRENE RADFORD



TALES NEWLY TWISTED
BY VONDA N. MCINTYRE
LAURA ANNE GILMAN
JUDITH TARR
SHERWOOD SMITH
... AND MORE!

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Introduction

Something about fairy tales, myths, folklore, and tall tales of any variety, calls to the demented imagination of writers. We want to hear our favorite parts over and over again, never mind the boring bits, or we finish a story and sigh, “Now if *I* were telling it...” Maybe simple, pig-headed obstinacy leads us to insist, “I could tell it better” or to wonder “what if this part or that were different, or I combined two stories, or set a tale in another time or place —”

Modern writers have not been shy about offering up their own renditions of classic fables, darkly twisted nursery rhymes, or hilarious renditions of Aesop. The idea is so appealing that the writers of Book View Café were not immune. “Hey,” we said to one another, echoing our fellow authors, “we can do that!”

And we did.

The resulting anthology spans both time and culture, with tales that run the gamut from light-hearted and silly to grim and heart-wrenching. You’ll find a few based on stories usually read aloud to children, and others from ancient poetry. The settings range from sun-drenched islands to the frozen north, from the gritty slums of a modern city to a fairy-tale kingdom.

A word of warning as you venture into these realms. These are not your grandmother’s fairy tales. You may well emerge with tales newly twisting in your own imagination...

Deborah J. Ross

Phyllis Irene Radford

Through Forests Dark and Grimm...

Hair Raising, by Pati Nagle

No Newt Taxes, by Patricia Rice

Rum Pelt Stilt's Skin, by Alma Alexander

Of Rats and Cats and Teenagers, by Irene Radford

The Tinderbox, by Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

Any Brave Boy, by Laura Anne Gilman

Hair Raising

Pati Nagle

Once upon a time there was a beautiful Maiden named Rapunzel, which means “radish.” Her name was given to her by the Evil Witch who kept her locked in a high tower. The Witch had a nasty sense of humor, or perhaps was merely envious of Rapunzel’s incredibly long, golden hair.

It was so long that Rapunzel had no need of carpeting in her room at the top of the tower. She could walk around barefoot on her own tresses and her feet would never get cold.

Being locked up, Rapunzel didn’t have much to do all day once she had finished brushing her hair (which only took an hour or two each morning). She spent the rest of her days sitting by the single window in her room, gazing out at the wide world and singing to amuse herself.

She liked to make up her own songs, but since she had spent her entire life in the tower, they were all incredibly boring. The best one, “Bird, Bird, Where Are You Flying?” was just barely better than insipid. The Witch gave Rapunzel a songbook out of desperation, to keep from being driven mad.

One day, a handsome Prince was riding by and heard Rapunzel singing. As he was a Romantic Hero, he instantly fell in love and decided he must have the singer for his wife. He followed Rapunzel’s voice to the tower and halted beneath her window, gazing up at her in a state of rapture.

Rapunzel gazed back at him in a state of curiosity. She had never seen a handsome Prince before, nor indeed any kind of Hero. She knew, though, that she was looking at a Hero because he had a lot of the qualities that Heroes in her songbook had: waving hair with a dark curl draping over his forehead, square jaw, square shoulders, shining sword, majestic steed.

The eyes that gazed up at her in adoration were as blue as a cloudless sky on a midsummer day. He was a *lot* easier on the eyes than the Evil Witch.

“Beautiful Maiden,” he said in a deep and husky voice, “your singing would make the angels weep, and now I see that you are the fairest creature in all the land! Pray, tell me your name!”

“Rapunzel,” said Rapunzel, smiling and shifting in her seat so that her hair showed to best advantage.

“And what lovely hair you have! Do you brush it a hundred strokes every day?”

“More like a hundred thousand. It’s quite long.”

The Prince drew a reverent breath. “How long?”

Rapunzel had never measured her hair. She looked down at the Prince, wondering why he cared.

“It’s really, really long, OK? I mean, I’m walking around on it here.”

The Prince looked fit to burst with joy. He leapt from his majestic steed, knelt down on one knee, and clapped a hand to his bosom, the other reaching toward Rapunzel’s window.

“Rapunzel! Rapunzel, let down your hair, that I may climb the golden stair!”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I would rescue you and make you my bride!”

“Oh!”

Being rescued sounded good. Not that she was terribly unhappy, but she knew that the Heroines in her songbook got rescued all the time, and she was pretty sure you had to get rescued before you could live Happily Ever After.

“All right,” she said, smiling. “You can rescue me.”

“Then let down your hair!”

Rapunzel frowned. “Don’t you have a rope or something?”

The Prince glanced at his accouterments, which included his shining sword, saddle, majestic steed and all its tack, but no rope. He shrugged. “Sorry, no.”

“Well, can’t you break down the door?”

The Prince peered at the tower. He got up, strode toward it, circumnavigated its base, and returned to his place beneath Rapunzel’s

window.

“Actually, there doesn’t seem to be a door.”

“Oh. Drat.”

Rapunzel had forgotten that little detail about the tower. She didn’t pay much attention to doors anyway, because the ones she had only led to things like her wardrobe and the privy closet. The Witch never used doors. She used Magic.

Undaunted, the Prince struck his princely pose once more and called out, “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair that I may climb the golden stair!”

Rapunzel stifled a sigh. She thought being rescued meant that the Prince should take care of everything, and not be making demands of her.

However, this was the first Prince who’d come along in her entire life, and she thought she might not get another chance, and he *was* really cute. So she gathered up her hair and set it in a large, fluffy pile on the windowsill.

“Heads up!” she called, and pushed her hair over the sill. It tumbled down in a golden cascade, fragrant with the scent of honeysuckle, its curling ends just brushing the ground at the base of the tower.

The Prince breathed a sigh of admiration and caught Rapunzel’s tresses in both hands, then set one booted foot against the stones of the tower and began to climb.

“OW!” shrieked Rapunzel.

The Prince let go, lost his balance, and fell smartly on his rump. He scrambled to his feet.

“Sorry, O fair Rapunzel! Maybe you should loop it over a hook or something?”

Rapunzel paused to wipe her watering eyes and mutter a few choice curses that she’d heard the Witch say when she thought Rapunzel wasn’t listening. She then gathered up an armful of hair and wound it twice ’round the curtain rod.

“Try now.”

The curtain rod clanked in its bracket. She felt a small tug, but not the scalp-burning yank that she had experienced a moment earlier.

Boots scrabbled against the side of the tower. Her heart beat faster to think that any moment she would be Rescued and carried off by her handsome Prince. She was a little vague about what would happen after that, but she figured it would be better than sitting in the tower.

A second tug at her hair was followed by a yelp and a thud. Rapunzel leaned out of her window and saw the Prince on his rump again. He looked up at her.

“Um, it’s a little slippery. Could you maybe braid it?”

Rapunzel glared down at him. “Are you kidding? Do you know how long that would take?”

“All right. Um, OK.”

The Prince picked himself up, brushed himself off, spat on both palms, and then caught hold of Rapunzel’s hair once more. He climbed slowly, hand over hand, slipping back one step for every two he gained. Once he lost his footing against the side of the tower and slid several feet before he caught himself, making Rapunzel utter a small squeak.

His manly brow furrowed in concentration, the Prince tossed back the dangling curl of his own dark hair and twisted Rapunzel’s hair around his ankle. Twisted it around his other ankle, heaved himself upward, then untwined the first ankle and took a new purchase higher up.

Twist and heave, twist and heave; his progress was slower now, but he no longer slipped backward. Rapunzel watched him climb closer, her pulse quickening at the thought that any moment she would be free! Free of the tower and her lonely life! Free to explore the wide world at the side of her charming rescuer! Free—

“Aaahh!”

A heavy jerk on her hair, enough to make her wince, was followed by a thud, a clank, and a small, rhythmic scraping sound. She looked out and saw the Prince dangling upside down, a large Knot of hair twined around one ankle, his arms flopping. His sword’s empty scabbard gently scraped against the stones of the tower as he swung back and forth, pendulum-like, his fingertips a couple of feet from the ground. The sword lay beneath him, shining, just out of his reach.

“Ah—could you, ah—”

Rapunzel turned away. Constrained by her hair twined around the curtain rod, still she managed, just barely, to reach her sewing basket, which sat on a nearby shelf.

“Um—Rapunzel?”

She brought the basket to the windowsill and rummaged inside for her scissors. She held them up, grinning in triumph as the sunlight flashed from the silvery blades.

“Fair one? Could you, ah...help?”

Snip, snip! And snip, snip, snip again. Actually, it took a lot of snipping, but she managed to cut through the entire thick, silky swath of her golden hair and left it hanging from the curtain rod. What remained barely brushed her shoulders.

Freed from the burden of her tresses, she felt an amazing lightness, almost as if she were floating. Her heart filled with exhilaration.

She tossed the scissors back in the basket and danced a little dance of delight, twirling once in the middle of the now-bare stone floor, then hopped up onto the windowsill. Catching hold of her hair, she gave it a tug to make sure it was still secure, and stepped off the sill.

Down, down she slid, the breeze of her descent wafting her newly-shortened locks. When she neared the Prince she kicked once against the tower, swung outward, released her hair and landed lightly on the sward.

“Rapunzel! Darling!”

The Prince gazed at her with hopeful, worshipping eyes. His face was rather red from hanging upside down, but still handsome. She looked at him, trying to decide if she wanted to help him. He had, after all, *tried* to rescue her. Mayhap they could still live Happily Ever After.

Nah.

She gave him her sweetest smile. “Thanks! I should have thought of that years ago.”

“Rapunzel? Beloved—?”

She turned to his majestic steed, which was peacefully nibbling at the sward. Gathering up her skirts, she nipped up into the saddle (which

Heroines are allowed to do, even if they've never ridden a horse before), and galloped away into the sunset.

She smiled, feeling that all was well, even though she hadn't gotten the Prince out of her hair.

No Newt Taxes

Patricia Rice

Tall and regal, Queen Ladyfaire stalked the solar, her velvet robes trailing across the silk carpet. In agitation, she stroked the rare, genetically designed amber newt on her shoulder. "I cannot imagine how this has happened! I've been told my generosity has nearly emptied the royal coffers. Until we replenish our wealth, we cannot afford the wedding you deserve, dear Sweetpea."

Golden hair streaming unpinned down her back as befitted her maidenly status, Princess Sweetpea continued plying her silver thread through her tapestry. "The crops have been bad these past few years. The farmers cannot send us their usual allotment. It is not your fault," she said sweetly.

Instead of being placated, the queen scowled. "Of course it is not my fault! The peasants just get lazier every day. They'll be demanding soup kitchens if we're not careful."

Sweetpea nibbled at her bottom lip and kept her gaze on her needlework. "We should put our wealth where it would do the most good. I do not require a large wedding."

Or any wedding at all, she added mentally, but she knew better than to express her opinion. She had been taught since birth that she existed merely to serve her country, and Prince Pleasant, her tiresome betrothed, had been selected accordingly. She didn't have the character to be a sacrificial lamb, but she was practical.

In two years, three months, and twenty-nine days she would reach her majority and take control of the kingdom from her stepmother.

"It would be in bad taste to waste coins on frivolity while our people go hungry. We could postpone the wedding," she suggested.

"Don't be ridiculous! The treaties have all been signed. It's imperative that we give you an extravagant wedding," the queen said without halting

her pacing. “The people expect to be entertained. They would rise up in revolt if we did not give them a spectacle. We must cut expenses elsewhere, that’s all there is to it.”

Sweetpea sighed. They had had this discussion so many times that she did not even need to think about her reply. “I cannot think my maid or my seamstress would wish their wages cut to pay for imported gold braid for more footmen and bugle blowers. Although it might be good to employ a few out-of-work laborers as footmen,” Sweetpea acknowledged.

Since it looked like it would be another one of *those* days, she might as well step on a few royal toes while she was at it. “If we absolutely must spend money on the wedding, then perhaps we could cut back on our annual linen order for the dining hall and use that money for footmen’s uniforms. That would employ the same laborers, would it not?”

“Don’t be foolish, Your Highness,” the Minister of the Exchequer said from his seat near the window, where he watched for messages from the birdnet. A pigeon signaled its arrival by landing on the newly installed wire, and he snagged the bird to unfasten the note. He perused the scrap before hurriedly scratching a reply message with his mini-quill. “If our factories are to increase profits, we need orders for both the uniforms *and* the linens. We’re *creating* jobs. It’s good for the kingdom.”

Sweetpea despised the self-absorbed Minister Chainty. Chainty owned manufactories in foreign kingdoms. The only jobs he created weren’t here.

When Chainty glanced up from the constant flow of messages, the princess granted him a slow, sweet smile and batted her lashes like a simpleton. “Then we must simply ask parliament to raise our royal income to cover both uniforms and linens, then, mustn’t we?”

The minister scowled forbiddingly, as if he knew he was being roasted, but the next pigeon landing on the perch distracted him.

“How can parliament raise our income when revenue is down?” The queen replied testily in his stead.

“Tax luxuries,” Sweetpea suggested. Knowing newts came from Arkania and wouldn’t concern Chainty, she continued, “The fad for pet designer

newts has become a kingdom-wide obsession. Perhaps we could tax their purchase and jeweled collars, like Neddy is wearing.”

Ladyfaire stared at her stepdaughter as if Sweetpea were possessed by demons. “*No newt taxes!*” she shrilled. “My friends would never speak to me again. And if Neddy’s collars and little sweaters cost me even *more*, we still won’t have money for a wedding.”

“You cannot have *everything*. If you must have your newts, then we can’t have an extravagantly useless wedding,” Sweetpea repeated dryly, anticipating the queen’s reaction to her circular logic.

“You are a horrible, spiteful, ungrateful child.” Ladyfaire swirled her purple robe over the golden brick not covered by the carpet. “Prince Pleasant will bring us rich fields of oleum. Our credit rating must remain impeccable until the vows are said.”

“We could tax oleum,” Sweetpea proposed maliciously.

Ladyfaire covered her eyes and appeared to melt with misery. “Selfish, selfish child. Do you want to drive the prince into another woman’s arms?”

“If you truly want my opinion—”

“I do not. You’re a child and know nothing of state affairs.” Ladyfaire stroked the amber newt and scratched behind its gill. “It is only my generosity that gives Pleasant to you at great cost to myself. Poor Neddy will have to wait until next year for a mate while we empty the vault for your wedding. Let the mirror tell us what to do.” She whipped back the draperies concealing a gold-framed looking glass.

A quiet countryside scene rather than the solar’s grandiose interior appeared inside the frame. A great forest filled one side of the surface. On the other, little men hauled a miner’s cart from a barren mountain. The miners were truly *little* men, no taller than their cart.

“I will happily forego the pleasure of marriage for another year for Neddy’s sake. Perhaps by then a miracle will happen and our spending will equal our nonexistent income.” Sweetpea bit off her thread and knotted it, not expecting the queen to hear her sarcasm.

Sweetpea had been tutored in economics by the wisest men in the kingdom by order of her late father. Queen Ladyfaire had spent her youth

studying how to marry for wealth and power. She apparently also had written her own dictionary, since her meanings for common words frequently differed from the ones Sweetpea had learned. The creative dictionary allowed the queen to win all arguments, in her own mind, at least. Once the queen resorted to the mirror, however, all logic fled.

“Look, my mirror shows us the answer. We will raise the price of our gold!” The queen admired the labors of the little men plodding from the mine carrying buckets of rocks.

“My gold,” Sweetpea corrected. “You may be my guardian and able to make the laws until I’m of age, but my father was the king and someday I will inherit the land. If you raise the price of gold, you will have fewer buyers and *less* income, while probably putting miners out of work.”

“Fewer workers means higher profits,” Chainty muttered, watching for the next message while scribbling his reply to the last.

“See, even the minister agrees. He’s a sound businessman, and you’re a child who knows nothing! Our people will adore us for saving them from newt taxes. That is why I’m the ruler here. Look and you will see.”

Ladyfaire drew herself up to her full stately five-feet-nine and snapped her fingers at the mirror. “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the most generous of all?”

The screen scrolled to darkness. A spinning multi-colored beach ball replaced the serenity of the forest scene. A moment later, an image appeared of Sweetpea as a young girl handing her chocolate bar to a crying child. A series of images flipped across the surface: Sweetpea at different ages, reading to the elderly, teaching a foreign student a new language, giving a penny—

Ladyfaire flung the drapery back to cover the screen. “Randish!” she screamed.

Sweetpea sighed and packed her sewing basket with her threads and tapestry. They could scarcely muddle through a year without one of these confrontations. She would have to send a check to Habitat for Dwarves in the queen’s name and then kick a newt to correct the mirror’s wrong impression again.

She was fairly certain the mirror was programmed to see her killed before she reached her majority. It had captured perhaps the only few moments of generosity in her otherwise severely sheltered life.

“Randish, call the woodcutter!” Ladyfaire screamed as the Lord Chancellor raced in, holding a hand to his hollow chest.

“Yes, your majesty,” the chancellor gasped, bowing. “He is filling the wood cellars.” He yanked a cord, sent a footman, and moments later, the hulking woodcutter strolled into the salon.

Since the palace required exorbitant amounts of wood and oleum to operate, it was not unusual for the woodcutter to be available. Sweetpea smiled and waved at Rochester, who winked back.

“Take her to the woods!” Ladyfaire shouted. “Chop off her head! I’m tired of the selfish chit taking all the credit around here.”

Aware of the routine, Rochester pulled his forelock. “Yes, your majesty, of course, your majesty. Same as last year then? The cottage, no allowance, and no birdnet?”

“Howsomever.” The queen flung up her beringed hand in dismissal. “Just take her out of my sight.”

Rochester bowed low and lifted the sewing basket before escorting the princess from the royal solar.

“She doesn’t mean it, your highness,” the woodcutter whispered reassuringly as they traversed the stairs to the great hall. “It must be that time of the month.”

“She’s a bitter old cow who will ruin the kingdom if nothing is done to stop her,” Sweetpea warned. “I thought you were off at school. Why are you here instead of your dad?”

“Dad’s slowing down, letting me take over the business,” young Rochester said, leading her through the palace’s golden halls. “Time rolls on, even in the forest.”

“It doesn’t roll on fast enough,” Sweetpea complained. “Ladyfaire and her cronies become more unreasonable with each passing day. I don’t know why the people don’t rise up in protest.”

“Oh, we couldn’t do that,” Randish said, assisting her into his cart. “Until you’re of age, who would we get in her place? Better the devil we know.”

“Better the devil than actually think about change, right,” she agreed wearily. “Security means doing the same thing day in and day out.”

“I thought you’d understand,” the woodcutter said in amusement. “My mother has the cottage all cleaned up and waiting for you. She and my father are all excited about your wedding. Dad’s carving little toy carriages like the one you’ll ride in to the ceremony. They’re planning on selling them at the street fair.”

“I’m sure they’ll be lovely, Rochester,” Sweetpea said wearily, wishing a young man as handsome and sturdy as this might carry on a logical conversation instead of a sentimental one. “Maybe with all their hard work, your mother will have her own newt someday.”

“She’s hoping, Your Highness. Since I’m not home much anymore, my parents need something to look after. They’ve picked out a pretty variety with green scales and an extra long tail.”

Being a student of economics was not a pleasant occupation when surrounded by maudlin fools, Sweetpea acknowledged as the cart rattled the familiar path into the woods. No one wanted to hear that newts were a frivolous waste of money, that people would be far better off pouring their coins into education, for instance. Or into a retirement plan.

She might as well try telling the queen to cut the wine budget and raise the servants’ pay. Well, actually, she had said that—the last time she’d been sent to the woods. Common sense wasn’t popular in Fairy Tale Kingdom. Even Lord Chancellor Randish had been appalled at her suggestion and called her a cold-hearted wench, but then Randish had a fondness for imported wine and reportedly owned several wineries.

Sweetpea was fairly confident that she had the corner on the kingdom’s market of common sense. No one at court had yet to understand that she said these things knowing she’d be sent to the woods, not because she had any hope of anyone actually *listening* to her.

She preferred the cozy cottage to the drafty castle any day of the week, but particularly in winter. Since it was late autumn now, she could hope to

stay warm by a cheery fire all her own until the holidays at least. If she were lucky, she'd have Rochester to admire on a frequent basis. She might even have time to finish her tapestry and work on her treatise examining the shortcomings of the kingdom's economic system.

Sometimes, she almost envied the peasants who had so much more freedom than she did, but she wasn't fool enough to think like that for long. No, she couldn't marry where she willed, but as far as she could determine, most people simply married whoever asked them. Love was sentimental claptrap to excuse hormonal behavior. So, she'd marry a prince, and in another two years, three months, and twenty-nine days, she'd be able to change her world.

Fair trade.

After several hours of wheel-rattling ruts, the cart rolled to a halt in a clearing deep in the forest on the outskirts of the kingdom. Rochester's parents had bought a charming bungalow closer to town on the proceeds of renting out this cottage for Sweetpea's imprisonment. But they always kept up the cottage. The mullioned windows sparkled, and the roof had been newly thatched so it would be clear of vermin.

"I'll be bringing your trunk in the morning as always," the woodcutter reassured her, helping her down from the high seat. "Your old things are just where you left them. Someone will be by with your supper soon. It's good to have you back again, Your Highness. We enjoy your visits." He squeezed her hand before releasing it.

"Thank you, Rochester. So do I." Mutual admiration was all they could share, she knew, but she offered him a grateful smile. "Will you see that I have plenty of ink and paper? If I'm fortunate, I will have time to write out my Merrymas cards and my wedding invitations while I'm here. I'll see that the dwarves reimburse you as usual."

He tugged his shiny blond forelock. "Of course. Have a good evening, Your Highness."

Sweetpea sighed with pleasure as she entered the gleaming cottage. "Home sweet home," she murmured, sliding her fingers over the waxed

tabletop where inkpots and her official stationery were already stacked and waiting. Here, she need not appear a simpleton and hide her work.

The first thing she did was rummage in her basket for her jeweled combs. With a sweep of her hand, she piled her waist-length hair on top of her head so it didn't constantly dangle in her face. Blasted silly rules of maidenhood, anyway. She'd be glad to be married if only so she could chop off the annoying locks.

The queen might not know how to economize, but Sweetpea did. She had invested her allowance in the undervalued royal lands the Queen had sold off over the years. Sweetpea currently reaped returns sufficient to pay far more than her pocket money allowed. Saving had meant doing without candy and pet newts, but having a decent roof over her head was worth the sacrifice.

The queen thought the princess lived here in deprivation, but Sweetpea actually had her own little fiefdom. She opened the icebox to a selection of her favorite juice drinks. Then she removed her treatise from her sewing basket and trimmed her favorite quill while wondering what the dwarves might bring her for dinner.

She hoped it was some of the savory pumpkin they'd prepared for her the last autumn she'd spent in confinement. Dear Dorky might spend the better part of his days on the birdnet, but he knew his way around the kitchen.

And she looked forward to seeing Sassy and Silly again. They always made her laugh as the court jesters never did. She might even enjoy hearing Dumpy grumble. His knowledge of mines was far greater than her own, and she always learned something from him. She would embroider them new shirts for the wedding in return for their company.

It truly was a pity Prince Pleasant wasn't the sort who would settle for a cottage in the woods instead of a great expensive oleum-slurping palace.

oOo

Queen Ladyfaire glowered at the papers the Lord Chancellor spread across the ruby-encrusted, rare onyx-wood desk in the king's study. She didn't miss her late husband until times like this.

“What do you mean I can’t pay for the wedding if I raise the price of gold? That’s ridiculous. You sound just like that silly snip, Sweetpea. Everyone wants gold. At luncheon today, I had at least half a dozen people admire my necklace. Tell the dwarves to mine more of it!” She fondled the ropes of intertwined precious metal she’d worn just to draw the envy of those who had thought she was not worthy of her power. She knew what people wanted. They told her so.

“Arkania already produces cheaper gold than your mines, your majesty,” the Lord Chancellor said apologetically. “If we raise our prices, then our merchants will simply import from Arkania.”

“How dare they!” Ladyfaire slapped her neatly manicured hand against the desk. “That’s not fair at all. Those miserable peasants have no real appreciation of the finer things in life.” She fretted, trying to remember what the king had done at times like these. He’d always had a trick up his sleeve. “We should go to war with Arkania,” she muttered. “We could blow their cheap mines off the map, conquer the country, and then the gold will be all ours.”

“Arkania stands between us and Betzelstyn, your majesty. And Arkania has a larger army. It behooves us to remain on friendly terms. Perhaps we could raise taxes on imported goods?”

“Newts come from Arkania. No newt taxes,” she responded absently. “Besides, I already waste half my income on taxes for wretched roads and schools that I never use. How the devil does Arkania produce gold more cheaply?”

“Slave labor. They have a plentiful population willing to work for food. Our miners would go on strike if we asked them to work for peanuts.”

A smile spread across Ladyfaire’s heart-shaped face. “Import cheap labor! Fire the miners. If Arkanians will work for nothing, we can give them extra peanuts to tempt them away from home.”

“Very good, your majesty,” the Lord Randish said with a bow, satisfied that he’d led her down the correct path. “It is most generous of you to consider the welfare of starving Arkanians. We could also outsource mine

management to Arkania. There is little difference in where paperwork is done now that we have the birdnet.”

“Outsource,” the queen nodded knowledgeably. “Of course. Do whatever you have to do. I will have that wedding of a century. Prince Pleasant has a widowed father who is looking for a wife, whether he knows it or not. I mean to have my hands on another throne before that silly twit of a stepdaughter of mine takes over.”

The Lord Chancellor knew better than to respond to royal chess playing. With signed orders in hand, he finally had the power to break the dratted miners’ iron grip on the gold mines.

He despised dwarves. Dirty rotten little varmints, all of them, always scheming and cheating and manipulating the markets as if they owned them. The Arkanians were at least a proper height so a man didn’t have to stoop to talk to them.

o0o

“She’s laid us off!” Ditzzy cried some weeks later, stumbling into the cottage still wearing his filthy work clothes. He flung his hard hat in a corner and yanked at his hair in frustration. “How can she lay us off? We know those mines better than anyone.”

Sweetpea looked up from her treatise with puzzlement. “The queen laid you off? Why would she do that? She loves her gold. Surely that isn’t her idea of economizing? The last I heard, she wanted to raise prices.”

One of the mine’s managers, Dumpy stomped in wiping sweat off his dirty brow. Older, more broad-bottomed, and shorter than Ditzzy, he wore a scowl that would break mirrors. “Apologies for the mess, Your Highness, but we didn’t know where else to go. We make our home in the mine, and they’ve barred the doors.”

Sweetpea gaped at him in horror. “That’s beyond foolish! Did you do something to anger the queen?”

Built as squarely as her cousins, with the same long, straggly hair but lacking their beards, Sassy dragged in, heading straight for the icebox. “The

queen's never liked us, you know that. The Lord Chancellor thinks we eat small children for dinner. Bigotry, pure and simple."

The dwarves were her neighbors and her friends. Sweetpea had opened her home to them, and they'd returned her hospitality with knowledge of the world outside the court. They weren't always the most pleasant-tempered people, but then, she'd lived with Ladyfaire for a dozen years. She'd take the company of dwarves any day.

"Surely Lord Randish doesn't believe anything so silly, or he would have worried that you'd eat me," Sweetpea said dismissively. "No, he's just too concerned with his own personal zealotry to care about anyone else's opinions. He doesn't realize that the world is changing, and that everyone must live and work together despite our differences."

The mine manager snorted. "That'll be the day when a lord anybody lives in a mine, or a miner lives in town. Fanciful notions, Sweetpea. We've got a few hundred workers out there with no place to go. Those miners've got families, young 'uns. What are they supposed to do?"

"Where's Dorky? I don't have birdnet here. Maybe he can tell us more," Sweetpea said fretfully, tapping her quill against the desk. Dorky was the office clerk. "We need all the facts. Closing the mine simply doesn't make sense. There must be a mistake."

How could closing a royal mine benefit the wedding? Sweetpea knew the queen was capable of only one thought at a time, and the wedding was currently her motivation for everything. Perhaps she should elope with Prince Pleasant and put an end to this idiocy.

But just thinking of Pleasant made her nose itch. He had the most dreadful mustache.

As if hearing her thoughts, Sassy's twin, Snotty, entered with a loud sneeze.

Rubbing his overlarge nose with a dirty handkerchief, Snotty sneezed, coughed, and placed a missive on the table. "Dorky's cleaning out his office. He sent this."

Ditzy helped himself to mugs from the tiny kitchen and poured the ale they stored here for convivial evenings like this. "It says we don't even get

our vacation pay, that's what it says. I promised the nephews a trip to Wonderland next summer!"

Sweetpea scanned the carefully scribed message and shook her head. "This can't be right. You're the only ones who know the mines. Perhaps Ladyfaire means to privatize the mines as she did the timber. Do we have enough savings yet to buy them?"

"Depends," Dumpy said, plopping his broad rear on the wicker couch. "We could borrow from our cousins in Betzelstyn if the bid is fair enough."

Snotty sneezed and produced a slightly less grubby handkerchief. "Investments don't pay health insurance," he grumbled. "I need my allergy potions."

Oh dear. Snotty without his allergy potions was not to be endured.

"Perhaps there are other mines?" Sweetpea asked tentatively. "I could write excellent references."

"Nobody's going to hire me if I'm sneezing all over them," Snotty reminded her.

"And if he can't get hired, he can't get insurance, and he can't go to the herbalist for his pricey potions without insurance. So he'll sneeze all over them," Sassy sing-songed. "And if he sneezes all over them, no one will hire him. Been there when I was a kid. The insurance the king offered was a lifesaver."

Dorky stumbled in, wiping his thick eyeglasses and shaking his head in weariness. "Arkanians," he muttered, grabbing the mug Ditzzy handed him. "They trucked in a load of Arkanian miners. The poor devils don't even know how to use the equipment."

All for the cost of a wedding. The dwarves sat in stunned silence while Sweetpea muttered *No newt taxes* and shook her head. Ditzzy offered her a mug of ale.

"Maybe we can start our own business," Silly offered.

Snotty sneezed.

With a sigh of decision, Sweetpea drew the jeweled combs from her hair. Her long golden tresses tumbled down her back. "Sell these. Divide the

proceeds among all the families so each can put the money where they need it most. That will give us time to think of something.”

“Socialism,” Dumpy said disapprovingly. “Bad stuff.”

“Call it unemployment benefits,” Sweetpea retaliated. “If Ladyfaire can make up her own dictionary, so can I. Leaders take care of their people,” she said sternly. “And the labor of my people provided those combs, so I’m merely returning what you’ve given me.”

“Lord Randish won’t like it,” Dorky warned. “He thinks even the babes and the elderly should earn their way.”

“How?” Sweetpea asked. “By not existing? The babes are our future and the grannies are our wisdom and history. They should be revered. Lord Randish never lifted an idle hand until he was twenty-five and his father booted him out of the house. He doesn’t get to preach what he doesn’t know.”

“The princess is turning into a tyrant,” Sassy declared saucily. “We’ve got to get the lady laid.”

Mellowed on ale and empty stomachs, the dwarves cheerfully began listing and comparing all the available royal bachelors in the seven kingdoms.

Not one of them mentioned Prince Pleasant, Sweetpea’s betrothed.

oOo

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the most generous of all *now*?” Ladyfaire asked in triumph. The Arkanian miners had groveled at her feet in gratitude when she’d assigned them to their new positions. Her friends had praised her to the skies for making gold cheaper for them to acquire, while discouraging the nasty encroaching little dwarves who foolishly demanded to be paid for their experience.

The Lord Chancellor watched her uneasily. “Your Majesty, it isn’t generosity that runs the kingdom. Really, you do yourself no favor—”

The queen waved him aside with irritation as the beach ball swirled and opened the magic screen—to reveal Princess Sweetpea handing her jeweled combs to a bunch of filthy dwarves.

Sweetpea is the most generous of all, the screen declared.

“What the hell does a stupid mirror know?” the queen screamed, yanking the curtains closed. “She gives diamonds to dirty animals and that’s generous? That’s stupid, that’s what that is. Those pigs probably have gold stolen from my mines hidden in their drawers. Paying their wages has drained my purse long enough.”

“Yes, as you say, Your Majesty. Encouraging laziness is not healthy. They’ll simply stay home and eat the proceeds of those diamonds rather than work. Now, if I might....” He spread the documents across her desk.

“I don’t want to read any more diatribes about dwarves, Randish.” She flicked his papers back at him. “I don’t care if they breed or shoot each other from now until eternity. I want to see gold in my coffers. I need to hold a betrothal dinner for a few hundred of my closest friends and advisors. They will expect Betzelstynian fish eggs. Will we earn enough off the mines now?”

The Lord Chancellor coughed politely and tapped his papers back in order again. “The dwarves are heathens, Your Majesty. They demand rights and practices that are immoral in the eyes of the gods. You cannot endanger the soul of your kingdom by allowing them to continue with their witchdoctory. This document will—”

“My gold mines, Randish,” Ladyfaire said ominously, narrowing her eyes. “You promised me gold in my vaults. Unless you’ve learned how to spin dwarves into gold, I don’t give a flying Wallenda if they drink magic potions until they fall into the river and drown. Dwarves don’t keep me on this throne. Parliament does. And Parliament expects fish eggs.”

“Yes, of course, I understand, Your Majesty.” The Lord Chancellor nervously tugged at his tight collar. “There will be a slight delay while the Arkanians learn their new jobs, Your Majesty. They are apparently unfamiliar with the birdnet or other modern equipment. They are digging with their hands. It slows the process. They need more training. Lord Chainty has suggested we could save money by turning off the safety equipment the Arkanians don’t understand and concentrate on teaching them to use shovels. He has considerable experience in the profit sector.”

The queen waved her hand dismissively. “Howsomever. Just tell me how I’ll pay for my state dinner and don’t suggest newt taxes!”

“Very well, Your Majesty. We could reduce your salary and benefits, return the Parliamentary pensions to the same coverage as our laborers—”

“I’m about to send you to the woodshed with Sweetpea, Randish,” the queen warned. “I cannot live on the funds I have! The people expect too much of me as it is. I’m barely scraping by, considering the upkeep on this damned expensive palace and the entertainment required to keep my throne. And my *friends* collect those Parliamentary pensions, Randish. You do understand that, don’t you? If I cut their funds, there will be a palace uprising of a certainty. They might burn me at the stake. Think again, Randish. Think very hard.”

The Lord Chancellor developed a petulant expression. “You could always cut the benefits to the unproductive elderly and expensive education for children, madam.”

At last, Queen Ladyfaire smiled. “Education has always been problematic, Randish. Witness Sweetpea, annoying child. I never thought it wise to have workers who think. It’s more generous if we take the burden of thinking from them. Let them work and be happy. Excellent. The elderly will complain, though. They’ve been spoiled in comfort for far too long. How will you keep them quiet?”

“Death panels, your majesty,” Randish said solemnly. “Fear always brings them into line. We will tell them that to prevent newt taxes, expenses must be cut. They may choose to take fewer benefits, or allow us to decide who is no longer relevant to society so we can eliminate the full expense of their upkeep. So many of the elderly are really no better than vegetables. They’re a drain on your coffers.”

The queen nodded in awe. “Generous, very generous indeed, giving them a choice like that while allowing our more productive citizens to keep their pets without excess cost. I thought there for a minute you were losing your touch, Randish. I apologize.”

“I do my best, madam,” he said smugly.

“What now?” Sweetpea asked wearily as Silly raced into the room carrying another newssheet. Without a job to keep her occupied, Silly spent her days reading the news anywhere she could find it. The birdnet would turn the young mother into a bomb-throwing radical shortly, but at least she was staying informed.

“They’re closing the schools three days a week!” Silly cried in more agitation than usual. “We’ll have the children home all day. How will I look for a job that way? I couldn’t afford a dwarf sitter even when I was working.”

Emptying a load of wood into the fireplace, Rochester dusted off his hands and snatched the newssheet from Silly’s hairy hands to scan the article. “This will mean my nephews won’t have the education they need to find jobs,” he growled. “And my sisters who teach won’t have enough salary to feed their kids. How is this helping the kingdom?”

Anger finally began to boil in Sweetpea’s otherwise placid soul. “I’ll tell Pleasant and his damned oleum fields to go feck themselves if this is what it costs to be married.”

Dumpy stacked the wood Rochester had dumped. “You can’t do that. Without oleum fields, how would the castle fuel its light and heat?”

“The same way we do here, with hard labor.” Sweetpea slammed the newssheet on the table, uncomfortably aware that she was paying the dwarves and Rochester for their hard labor. She couldn’t chop a tree if she spent all day at it—

But chopping wood would employ many unemployed people and use their natural resources instead of Pleasant’s damned oleum fields.

She drifted into contemplation of the various results of such an immense production change—until Snotty limped in, sneezing. Of all the dwarf management, Snotty was the eldest. His yellowing beard trailed to his knees. But his experience had kept the mine running efficiently this past decade. He’d been training Dumpy to take his place in the office, but now that they had no office, Snotty spent his time fishing.

He carried in no fish for their dinners tonight. He sank into a moss-stuffed chair and shook his shaggy head. "I'm moving to Arkania. They say they have socialized witchdoctory and it's cheaper to live there."

"Nonsense," Silly scoffed. "Arkania has no forests. You'd hate it there. Did the queen start taxing your fish?"

"No, she's cutting my pension. After she laid us off, it was all I had. I'm too old to chop wood to heat the shack I've had to retire to. I can't pay for my fuel if they cut my benefits. It's warmer in Arkania. I won't need oleum there."

"My dad won't like having his pension cut. He was saving up for a newt of his own." Frowning, Rochester sat his handsome self down to study the newssheet.

Sweetpea held her head and tried to wrap her mind around this new disaster. "Who will teach your grandkids how to fish if you leave, Snotty?" she asked. "And Dumpy will still need your advice once I control the mines. I'd hoped you'd stay on the directors' tree. They think the *elderly* are government waste?"

"Do they have schools in Arkania?" Silly asked. "If they have schools and witchdoctory, I'll move, too."

"Arkania is a poor country. Their schools don't compare with ours! Or they didn't," Sweetpea corrected gloomily. "And their witchdoctory isn't as good. They lack technology."

"Then you'd better find a way to get us our jobs and benefits back," Snotty warned. "Our hard labor paid for all that fancy technology and education. We can't pay for them without jobs, so it looks to me like Arkania will catch up with us pretty soon. Or vice versa. The queen sure ain't building the birdnet or producing gold. Nor her lord and lady friends who'll be eating on imported fish eggs at the royal dinner."

"What royal dinner?" Sweetpea glanced up, an idea forming at the back of her devious mind.

"The one the queen is holding in honor of your nuptials. They'll probably have to call you back for that. And you'll forget all about us out here. It's

real easy to forget the little people when you're up there in that palace," Snotty said sadly.

"It's easy to forget the cold and wind when you're warm and snug," Sweetpea agreed with a dangerous look in her eye. "Perhaps we need to change our tactics a bit. First, let's gather all the seamstresses, bustierres, and tailors together. No royal dinner goes without new wardrobes."

Dumpy lifted his head from the table where he'd been snoring until a few moments ago. Apparently, he'd been listening. "The seamstresses and the tailors and the *merchants*," he added. "They must all agree to raise their prices enough to pay for schools and pensions if Parliament won't."

"That tactic won't work for long," Sweetpea warned. "The court will start ordering their garments from Arkania once they realize what we're doing. That's why we need a second approach as well."

Rochester looked up from his perusal of the paper and a fire lit his eyes. "Cold and wind," he said enigmatically. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh yes, yes, I would," Sweetpea said with a truly malicious smile. "The queen and her court don't want to disturb their comfortable lives with new taxes. They have the wealth to make laws to suit themselves, and they're unwilling to share that wealth with children or the elderly or even the brave soldiers shivering on the borders, while they sit snug and warm in their castles, buying fancy robes and corsets. And useless *newts*."

Even Silly grew wide-eyed. "What are you saying?" she asked in hope.

"I'm saying if laborers must pay for royal dinners so the queen and her courtiers can have cheap newts and oleum, and prevent us from accumulating the wealth to join their ranks, then the nobles must pay their fair share as well. That's all I'm suggesting."

"Revolution would be easier," Snotty said with a sniff.

"Revolution leads to anarchy and then leadership goes to the biggest bullies," Dumpy corrected.

"She's saying the people need to take back their power," Rochester said with the fervor of discovery. "We must make the court as cold and uncomfortable as we are. They need to see what it's like to be us."

“Operation Discomfort,” Sweetpea agreed, regarding the woodcutter with pleasant surprise. “If the court, with all its wealth, wisdom, and experience, is too cowardly and lazy to find a way to take care of children and our future, then we must provide the leadership they lack.”

“Cut off their heads,” Snotty suggested. “Save us a lot of trouble.”

“While I may agree in theory,” Sweetpea said with a smile, remembering the queen’s orders to have her head whacked, “I must object on sanitary grounds. Beheading is a messy business. Making their positions less comfortable should sort out the lazy ones from the ones who honestly wish to work for the kingdom.”

“We have no authority,” Dumpy warned. “What can we do?”

Sweetpea had thought about this for a long while. Usurping authority would make her and her friends very unpopular, but leadership was more than popularity. It was responsibility. For the sake of her kingdom, she had to take the risk.

It wasn’t as if Pleasant would give a feck if she stood on her crown and sang the *Hallelujah* chorus. Give him a pink heron and a croquet ball and pat him on the head and he was a happy puppy.

“We could start with the oleum,” she suggested, thinking aloud. “I will tell Pleasant if he wants a royal wedding, then he must sell his oleum to the distributors I choose. He’s too concerned about acquiring the power of my throne to worry about natural resources, so he won’t care.”

“And then your distributors can raise fuel prices to pay for schools and the court will have to stop using so much fuel or go bankrupt,” Silly shouted in triumph.

Or raise newt taxes, which they could have done in the first place and saved a lot of trouble, Sweetpea thought. “That ought to make the court shiver a little this winter.”

“It would be smarter if they learned to use their own woodcutters and resources, even if they cost more than oleum,” Rochester said, looking to the future. “They’d have the revenue from our earnings in the long run, and they wouldn’t have the expense of supporting unemployed woodcutters.”

“Won’t higher oleum prices hurt Uncle Peter and the other grocers and merchants in the city?” Silly asked worriedly.

“That’s just it—the oleum is only the beginning of forcing Parliament’s hand,” Sweetpea said, thinking furiously. “The grocers will have to raise their prices to cover their fuel costs, which will hurt noble pockets even more. In the spring, we’ll turn all that wasted land between the town and the forest into gardens and orchards to keep food costs down for the people who work in the garden, but the nobles have no idea how to raise their own food. We can charge high apple prices to pay for free apples to the schools and our elderly.”

“Socialism,” Dumpy grumbled.

“Fair trade,” Sweetpea retorted. “If they don’t want to help the workers of the kingdom, then we have to gain the power to help ourselves, just as they do. If that’s socialism in your dictionary, so be it. In my dictionary, it comes under justice. If they want our apples and bustiers, then they must pay for our education and elderly!”

Sweetpea tried to be logical and not angry, but she was still so infuriated by the royal dinner edicts that she wanted to kick a newt.

“None of that will make the court cold,” Silly said with a pout. “We should break their windows and refuse to repair them. Let the queen try to fix a window!”

“Breaking laws will simply get us arrested and take away what little power we have,” Rochester chided.

“But if the seamstresses start charging more for the court’s fur-lined corsets and cloaks and the other finery for the dinner,” Sweetpea pointed out, “the nobles will learn what it’s like to keep their houses cold and put off new clothes, just like us.”

Sweetpea relished the idea of the queen and her friends paying fortunes for their scandalous conduct. The dwarves had slaved all their lives to make good homes for their families. There was no justification for starving them to buy gold collars for newts and fish eggs for fat lords.

If all went well, in two years and twenty-six days, the court would be shivering, pinching pennies, and more than ready for her to take over.

If only she could delay the wedding until then.... But she needed Pleasant's cooperation for her plan to work.

"Inflation," Dumpy said gloomily, raining on her triumphant parade. "That's a recipe for inflation."

"If we're fueling our houses with natural resources and raising our own groceries, who does inflation hurt?" Sweetpea asked innocently.

"The ones importing oleum and fish eggs!" Silly cried jubilantly.

"And useless newts," Rochester murmured. Sweetpea looked upon him with more than approval. He was much smarter than she'd thought.

oOo

"What do you mean, the corset will cost three times what it did last year?" Ladyfaire demanded, kicking a bolt of gold-woven fabric and scowling at her fashionista. "That's ridiculous. You can't do that."

"Costs keep going up, your majesty," the fashionista said, cowering behind her wardrobe of fabrics. "The seamstresses won't work unless I pay for a day school for their children. And now that the dwarves control the fabric industry, they've tripled the price per bolt. Plus, the cost of heating my shop has gone up. I have to cover expenses."

"I'll need a dozen new gowns and bustiers before the wedding and a dozen for the wedding. I can't pay that!" The queen was nearly in tears. All her cost cutting, and she still couldn't have the wardrobe she needed to impress a king. "You should give me a quantity discount."

"If you'll pay half in advance, I'll do that, Your Majesty. I can let one of the seamstresses go and ask the others to work harder. I can make it work, madam." The fashionista didn't come out from behind her wardrobe until she heard approval of that suggestion. The queen had been known to fling Neddy Newt at people who annoyed her. The Arkanians had been using newts as weapons for centuries.

"Don't be ridiculous," the queen shouted. "You will have to cut *your* profit or fire *two* seamstresses."

"Yes, your majesty. I just bought a newt the other day. They are very expensive to keep up. I will have to let the new seamstresses go."

“Excellent! Newts are wonderful companions, aren’t they? They’re so relaxing! See the Lord Chancellor about the invoice, and you must bring your newt next time. I’m sure Neddy will love to meet him.” The queen stroked the pet lounging on her shoulder, and his little tongue licked her ear in gratitude.

Ladyfaire privately steamed while the fashionista scurried away to consult with Lord Randish. She counted the seconds until the chancellor arrived in her solar.

“What does she mean, the dwarves are controlling the fabric industry?” the queen roared in a very unqueenly manner as soon as he entered.

“I hesitated to tell you, Your Majesty,” Lord Randish said deferentially. “But the dwarves organized the sheep herders and the spinners and started charging higher prices for the thread Lord Chainty uses in his looms. When the price of oleum went up, he had to sell shares in the factory to pay for the upkeep of his palaces, and the dwarves bought them. Now they control all the manufactured fabrics in the kingdom.”

“How is that possible? What gives the dirty little villains that right?” the queen cried in astonishment.

“They’ve broken no laws, madam. They’re organizing the oleum sales industry as well. Almost all the oleum merchants are dwarves now, and they’re charging separate fees for deliveries and service so they can maintain their private schools. There are serious rumblings around the court about fuel bills.”

“How can that be?” The queen paced up and down her elegant solar. She was wearing a path in the gold brick. Perhaps she should use diamond tile. That was supposed to last longer. She wondered if she could persuade Parliament to pay for it. Appearances were everything, after all.

“How can the dwarves own anything?” she argued. “I thought we’d arranged it so they’d have no money. They’re just wood chopping, mine-digging trolls.”

“I warned you, your majesty,” Lord Randish said with satisfaction. “They’re heathens. They don’t follow our rules. We need to control them.”

Ladyfaire rolled her eyes. “You can’t control them if they don’t follow rules. Would you like to export them to Betzelstyn?”

“Yes,” Lord Randish said with great relish. “I’m sure they’re breaking all the immigration laws. Let’s ship them out.”

“Only the old ones are immigrants, Randish,” the queen protested. “The rest were born here. We’d have to change the laws to declare that anyone born to a dwarf isn’t a citizen of Fairy Tale Kingdom. And since they’ve been intermarrying with the paupers for years, such laws would create a great deal of confusion. I don’t want to be any more confused. Just make it all go away, Randish.”

“If we don’t control the dwarves, they will control us, Your Majesty. We will have to destroy their looms and kingdomize the oleum industry. If Parliament controls the price of oleum, prices should go down and the court will be appeased.”

“Parliament run the oleum industry?” The queen considered that. “I won’t have to do anything, will I? This is all giving me a headache. Where the devil is Parliament when I need them? Isn’t this their job? Have them raise my dress allowance and let *them* balance the damned budget.”

“With fewer people working, the kingdom’s revenue is declining, Your Majesty. Our merchants aren’t hiring because it would mean fewer newts for them. We already owe Betzelstyn more than we can repay,” the Lord Chancellor said cautiously, inching toward the door. “There really is no solution except....”

“No newt taxes!” the queen shrieked, dragging open the draperies on the magic mirror. “Dammit, Mirror, why can’t you show me a real solution instead of that ungrateful chit of a stepdaughter of mine? Tell me how to pay for her damned wedding!”

The whirling beach ball whisked away, revealing an image of Sweetpea along with a host of other children, feeding apples to newts in a zoo.

“She’s cut off her hair!” the queen cried in horror. “What is the meaning of this?”

The princess’s new bob was unadorned by diamond combs, and her homespun gown had no bustier. While the queen watched, Sweetpea

retrieved a fallen penny from the dusty ground and, with a laugh, dropped it in a charity box.

A man walking beside her cut off one of his silver buttons and dropped it in the box as well.

“Where the devil is she? And who’s that man with her?”

“The Duke of Arkansas, madam,” Randish said, worrying at his mustache. “She is not thinking of making an alliance with a duke, is she?”

“How should I know!” Ladyfaire screamed. “What am I supposed to make of this nonsense, Mirror? I told you not to show me that ungrateful, wicked chit. I want to see *me*. I’m running this bloody nuisance of a kingdom. Give *me* some credit!”

The mirror obligingly blackened to a swirling beach ball and reopened to reveal Prince Pleasant carrying his pink heron out to his sports chariot, driven by ten horses. On the palace stairs, the King of Pleasant offered a diamond-studded newt collar to a sweet young thing who covered him with grateful kisses.

Ladyfaire shrieked like a factory alarm.

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Sweetpea and Rochester held hands and studied the adorable bungalow Rochester had designed to harness Arkania’s abundant sunshine for fuel. Beside them, the Duke of Arkansas in his military uniform admired the design’s best features.

“It is Tomorrowland,” Sweetpea murmured with pleasure. “Everyone could afford lovely cottages instead of living in mines.”

“Housing like this is ingenious, but it will take time and money,” the duke said sadly. “My kingdom does not have the skilled dwarves yours does. Your schools are the envy of all the kingdoms.”

Sweetpea had been studying that problem these last lovely weeks since she’d accepted the invitation to visit sunny Arkania to discuss her radical economic theories. She wouldn’t mind wintering here every year. The duke and his government were sympathetic to her desire to serve her people, not her Parliament. They weren’t likely to ask for her head to be whacked.

Better yet, her handsome Rochester understood the *practicalities* of a kingdom's needs as well as she understood economic theory. If she negotiated her own treaties, a royal alliance could be a joint business with a duke instead of a marriage. And a marriage could be a marriage. She glanced lovingly to Rochester, who kissed her unmaidenly short hair. Elopement had made the whole expensive royal wedding party unnecessary.

Before she could speak, Silly raced in, waving birdnet messages. Since taking over management of the corset industry, the young dwarf had had her hair coiffed and now wore tunics and leggings she'd purchased from dwarf manufactories. Her eldest son was learning how to install the birdnet throughout the industry, and her eldest daughter had built a faster loom.

"It's from the queen!" Silly cried. "And Parliament! They've ordered our looms destroyed. They say they're too dangerous. And they want you to come home."

The duke frowned and Rochester sympathetically squeezed Sweetpea's hand. Both waited for her to make a choice that she'd already made.

She took the documents and scanned them dismissively. "My Parliament doesn't like change. This proves that they live in the past and care more for themselves than the people they should be serving. I had hoped they would rise above this foolishness, but I feared they would not."

She produced a document of her own from the purse she'd made of the tapestry once intended to adorn a throne. "Tell them I will not be coming home until they can give up newts and gold bricks and put our children back in school and pay our soldiers without borrowing more money. Let them live like the rest of us, if that's what it takes. And if they do not obey this order, I will have them all removed from office once I am queen."

The duke arched his regal eyebrows. "Can you do that, remove your Parliament?"

Sweetpea nodded. "It's in our Constitution; a vote of no confidence from the queen sends them all home to elect a new Parliament. Ladyfaire won't do it because they cater to her whims, but I don't need their wealth. My wealth is in my people. If I serve them, they will serve me."

“You don’t need oleum to keep you warm, you have me,” Rochester murmured, nuzzling her ear.

Sweetpea sent him a dazzling smile, which she turned to the solemn duke. “And with our aid, Arkania will organize their apple orchards and newt industry so everyone in Fairy Tale Kingdom can afford a newt. Working together, we will make a powerful union someday.”

The duke kissed her hand and didn’t look displeased at this response. “Arkania will be as wealthy as Fairy Tale Kingdom once was.”

Silly took Sweetpea’s papers but looked puzzled. “But what will happen to us?” she asked. “If they close our looms as well as the mines, we’ll starve.”

The duke knew the answer to that one. “You and your cousins will teach my people how to mine properly. They will pay you for their education instead of wasting their new wealth on newts and firewater.”

“I liked the looms,” Silly said sulkily. “They’re clean and I can wear prettier clothes.”

“And you can build looms here,” Sweetpea suggested. “Your children know the business. You like it here. We can sell our investments in the Fairy Tale Kingdom and start manufacturing in Arkania, where we don’t need oleum so prices will be lower. Sneezy can run our sales office at home and fish as much as he likes. Let the queen figure out how to pay for gold once her new miners have been trained and demand more money. If she won’t pay, they’ll go home—experienced and ready to work here. By then, we’ll be back in power, and you can return to your old jobs.”

The duke gestured proudly at the sunny vista. “We will sell your country many newts, which will pay for your people to teach mine and there will be thousands of skilled workers who can buy your products in the future. Tomorrowland,” he said in satisfaction.

Sweetpea smiled happily at her woodcutter and the duke. They had taught her independence and the value of collective thinking. Her theories hadn’t been entirely wrong, but a good dose of dwarf practicality had taught her to modify for the real world. And learning to love had opened her eyes to true understanding.

No one person could be right all the time, especially sheltered as she had been. That's why *everyone* had to lend a hand, and everyone should have a say in what they knew best. *Tomorrow* was as important as today.

And this way, she got to enjoy her wedding night with a man she loved instead of a prince she despised. She stood on her toes and kissed her woodcutter.

o0o

On the day the royal wedding dinner was supposed to have been held, Queen Ladyfaire opened her magic mirror and screamed when she saw the woodcutter kissing Sweetpea and presenting her with an organically grown, non-designer, tax-free newt of her own.

“Off with the ungrateful chit’s head!” she shrieked.

But Lord Chainty had retired to a yacht in Betzelstyn to sit on the wealth he’d accumulated from not contributing to the Fairy Tale Kingdom’s coffers. Lord Randish was busy laying logs on the royal fire in the chilly solar. Now that they were overseeing their new lumber company, Rochester and his large family no longer needed income from the palace. The hard-working dwarves had all packed up and moved to sunnier climes and were no longer available for service. Randish had achieved what he wanted most, but now there was no one to carry out orders.

Neddy licked the queen’s royal ear, and she scowled and flung him at the mirror. “What the hell good are you? I’m trading you in for a cheaper model,” she grumbled. “And that goes for you, too, Mirror.”

The whirling beach ball sported a Cheshire cat grin.

Rum Pelt Stilt's Skin

Alma Alexander

There is a rot at the heart of the Kingdom.

There is a curse that can't be broken.

There used to be a formal garden behind the White Palace, a place where a green sward and a carefully cultivated riot of flowers surrounded a marble fountain. Now they had taken to calling it the Walk of Queens, because the statues raised beside its paved walkway were not just beautiful works of art. They marked the graves of five women who had tried and failed to remove that curse. Six, now—but the sixth was too new, too raw, for the statue to have been raised yet.

And the curse was still there.

And the word was out that the King was looking for a new wife.

o0o

The man who sat brooding in the corner of a wayside inn nursing a half-drunk tankard of ale was one of the King's Ministers, although his shabby and travel-worn clothing certainly did not mark him as any sort of dignitary. But that was all right—he was hardly bound for a foreign court. They were all out of foreign Princesses for the King to carry off to the White Palace on the hill above the city—all out of willing ones, anyway. The Minister could hardly blame them. Marriage to this King seemed to carry an automatic death sentence after only seven days—and seven days as a Queen was proving to be less than enticing for a prospective bride. The handful of ministers had been sent out into the countryside to scour the houses of the aristocracy for suitable daughters—but this man, at least, had found slim pickings.

He had found only one young woman of marriageable age, and he suspected even that was because he had arrived earlier than he had been expected and had caught the family by surprise; and even this young woman was hastily put beyond his reach by a sudden and (the Minister was certain) rather unexpected announcement of her impending nuptials by her father. She had looked rather astonished as she had gazed on the man who had been named as her future husband—and so had that man. The Minister could hardly stand up in the house that had, after all, offered him hospitality and accuse his hosts of lying. However, by the time he could extract himself from that situation, word of his errand had gone out before him and every other house that he had visited had been distinguished by its lack of any females of childbearing age. He was on his way back to the White Palace, to the King, empty-handed and heavy-hearted.

He had not meant to enter into a conversation on this matter with any he met on the road—it was the King's business, after all—but somehow despondency and the ale had loosened his tongue at this particular hostelry. He was not quite sure how it had come about, but he found himself discussing the daughter of a local tanner and leatherworker with a brace of drinking companions whose beer he appeared to have purchased for them as payment for this information.

The young woman in question was certainly not of noble blood, and was probably, judging by certain turns of phrase and eloquent expressions on the faces of the minister's informants, at best...homely. But she was of the right age, if only just barely, she was not promised to anybody, and best of all she had a reputation of being a good weaver...something that the Minister could, if all else failed, present as his reason for bringing this girl to the Palace. A weaver is what the King needed. The unfinished tapestry which stood mocking them all in the golden room at the top of the palace tower—the tapestry which was prophesied, when completed, to reveal the name of the evil spirit which bedeviled the King and his Kingdom—needed a woman's hand to work it.

Six Queens had tried, and failed. But perhaps the King's mistake had been marrying the women first, before he had brought them here to finish

the tapestry and remove the curse. Perhaps, this time, he could use the promise of a crown as a lure and a reward rather than a pre-requisite. Perhaps only a woman whose head had not yet felt the weight of that crown could accomplish the task. And besides...if this one failed, as the others had failed, there would be no seventh Queen to lay beside the six who already slept the eternal sleep on the Walk of Queens. The woman who failed could be buried quietly somewhere out in an unknown corner, in an unmarked grave.

This girl's father might not be too eager to hand her over to such a potential fate—but on the other hand, he was, by all the accounts the Minister had heard, poor enough to let her go for a small discreet purse of gold...and besides, there was always the chance, the *chance*, that she could do this thing, and actually become the next Queen. In which case, of course, the purse of gold would be multiplied, a thousand fold, by virtue of having his beloved daughter sit in a golden throne by the side of the King of the land. As for her not being the most appropriate of brides for a king—well—the Minister could, he found himself thinking, gild the lily, as it were, as best he could during the remainder of the journey back to the White Palace, and present his King with—if not an ideal prospect—at least an opportunity.

He thought better of seeking out the tanner's house that night, having himself imbibed more than he thought was entirely advisable and feeling distinctly light-headed with it. But he fought down an incipient hangover headache the next morning, and presented himself at a decent hour on the doorstep of the tanner's workshop.

The man who came to the door at his knock looked promising—he appeared thin and tired, and his eyes were bloodshot and bleak. He had not had much sleep of late.

"I am looking for Geerd, the leather worker," the Minister said, knowing full well that the man stood before him. "I come from...the King."

That had less of an effect that the Minister had expected, or hoped for. Geerd simply nodded, wiping his hands on the sides of his treads.

"I am Geerd," he said. "What does the King want with the likes of me?"

“Your daughter,” the Minister said.

Geerd straightened, his gaze sharpening a little. “My *daughter*?” he said, his voice wary. “What has my daughter to do with the King?”

“She is by reputation a skilled weaver,” the Minister said, repeating gossip he had only heard for the first time the previous night over beer, in a voice of such conviction and authority that Geerd actually stepped back in the face of it. “As even you will know, there is a tapestry in the heart of the White Palace that desperately needs to be completed....”

“Yes,” Geerd said. “I know. I also know that every hand that was laid to the task belongs to a dead woman. What, the King has run out of Princesses and grand ladies to marry, that now he needs to kill my child?”

“If she succeeds, he will make her Queen,” the Minister said.

“They were all Queens, before they began, all the ones who died,” Geerd said. “And they are all just as dead.”

“I am authorized to offer you this,” the Minister said, hefting a small leather purse in the palm of his hand. He was, of course, authorized to do no such thing—but he had every hope of this small investment bearing rich dividends if his scheme came to fruition. “If the girl comes with me, today.”

“My last apprentice left me, four days ago,” Geerd said. “My wife has been dead these ten years. My younger daughter is sick, and like as not will not live to see the next summer. This shop...and Antje...are all that I have. I do not believe that you can offer me enough gold to sell my....”

“Papa,” said a clear high voice from inside the shop. “With the gold you can hire another apprentice, buy medicine for Caja. I will go to the King.”

“Anouk...my Antje...”

“I *am* a good weaver, Papa.” Apparently she had been listening in to the conversation, from within. She had heard enough.

“So were they, the others, the rest. The Queens. I cannot send you to your death....”

“You are not sending me, Papa. I choose to go.”

She came out of the house as she spoke, into the Minister’s sight. He gave her a long appraising look and hid a small sigh—he had not been far wrong. The girl was tall, rangy, almost bony; her hands were long-fingered

and well enough shaped but perhaps a little on the large side, and raw from the work she had been doing in the house and in the tanner's shop; her ankles were thin, red from the cold, and her bare feet were thrust into a pair of wooden clogs. She wore a none-too-clean white cap on her head, and from underneath it a few strands of lanky hair of a nondescript color escaped to fall over her face. She had a somewhat prominent nose, and direct blue eyes—she would have to be taught not to hold and challenge a man's gaze as she was doing right at that moment, before she was presented to the King.

It was Anouk who reached out and plucked the purse from the Minister's hand, and closed her own father's hands around it. As she was doing so, she leaned in and kissed him lightly on one weathered cheek, her only gesture of farewell. She hesitated for just a moment, as though she was considering going back in to take her leave of her sick younger sister, but appeared to decide against it, and turned to the Minister instead.

"I am ready," she said simply.

The Minister found himself a little disconcerted, but this was what he had come for, after all—at least he would not return to the Palace empty-handed. He nodded at Geerd, and turned on his heel to walk away. Anouk followed.

"We had better," he muttered unwillingly, without glancing back but very aware of her appearance at his back, "find you some halfway appropriate clothes."

He handed the girl over to the wife of the innkeeper when he returned to the hostelry, giving the woman the rest of that day and that night to make the girl more presentable. He was planning to leave early the next morning.

It took him a moment to recognize Anouk when he emerged into the courtyard of the hostelry in the gray light of the morning after. She was still wearing her wooden clogs, but she had been given a pair of clean worsted stockings, which he caught a glimpse of underneath the hem of a not entirely new but clean and well-made dress that might have belonged to the innkeeper's wife herself. The cap had vanished, and her hair had been braided into a neat crown about her head—it must have been washed,

perhaps with chamomile, because it seemed blonder than the Minister thought it had been the day before. She was still as long-limbed and angular as a young colt, but that could not be helped, and the new dress did seem to give a hint of the fact that with the right seamstress a womanly figure could well emerge from underneath the shapeless garments she wore. She met the Minister's gaze squarely, with full understanding; her hands were folded together against her ribcage with a strange serenity as she waited for him to move or speak.

When he finally did, it was brief.

"You clean up into a passable package," he said brusquely. "Come. We should be on our way."

The Minister wondered how the others had fared, his colleagues sent out in other directions to find the King a new wife. When he and Anouk arrived at the White Palace, he sent her into a quiet anteroom to wait, with a footman on duty at the door just in case she should decide to bolt after all, and went to speak to the King alone; he was not away for long, and when he came back it was to crook a finger at Anouk, who had been quietly sitting on a chair upholstered in dark brocade, to follow him.

They crossed empty halls, passed along colonnades flanking cold winter courtyards, and finally climbed a long, endless, winding stair. Right at the top, a single door opened off a small landing. The Minister turned a large iron key that stood in the door, and pushed it open, gesturing for Anouk to go inside. She obeyed, and found herself in an eyrie.

The room was many-sided, and every side had a window, and the windows looked out over the Palace, and the grounds, and out into the countryside. A long way away to the horizon a line of blue mountains was visible against the sky; in another direction, there was the hint of water as the light reflected off the lake to the south of the Palace; another view showed a wide and dense wood, partly bare of foliage now that it was winter but enough of it evergreen to give a sense of its depth and scope.

The inside walls of the room, in between the windows, were gilded and shone with a soft golden glow.

"Oh," Anouk breathed. "How beautiful."

“Never mind that,” the Minister said. “Look, here—this is all you need to pay attention to.”

Anouk brought her gaze back to the center of the room where a loom was set up, a half-finished tapestry upon it. At its foot was a basket containing a pile of yarn; in front of it, a small three-legged stool.

“This is what my lord the King bade me tell you,” the Minister said. “Your task, which begins right now, is to weave that tapestry until it is done. You have seven days to accomplish this. You will see nobody from the moment you set your hand to the loom to the moment those seven days are up, and the King himself will climb up here to inspect your work. If you succeed, you will be wed to the King the very next morning, and become the Queen of the land. If you do not succeed....”

He did not finish. He did not have to. Anouk already well knew the price of failure. Six Queens lay in their graves, somewhere in the gardens below—six Queens who had paid the price of failure.

She realized that a part of her should be afraid, but somehow she could not quite seem to summon up fear.

“What is the tapestry’s design?” she asked instead. “How am I supposed to finish something of whose final form I have been given no hints?”

“The tapestry knows,” said the Minister. “It needs a woman’s hand, to weave—but the design is already within it. Because the word is...that when it is done it will hold the true name of the demon who is the canker at the root of this realm—and once we call him by that true name, he will be vanquished, and he will be gone forever. Show some sense, girl. If we already knew that name, then we would not need the tapestry. That is why you are here. To find this secret out.”

“But how will I know...” the practical Anouk began, but the Minister raised his hand for silence.

“Enough,” he said. “It is done. Your seven days have begun.”

He hesitated, as though he considered wishing her luck—but decided against it. Instead, he gave her a small sharp bow and backed out of the room, closing the door behind him. Anouk heard the key turn in the lock. She was alone with the magic, alone in what felt as though it was the heart

of the kingdom; she felt as though this room had been designed for the single purpose of allowing somebody who loved this land to come up here and gaze out and see every hidden nook and cranny of it all, water and wood, hill and dale, village and town...

The light was starting to fade, the views vanishing into shadows and twilight, and she finally investigated the rest of the room she had been locked into. She discovered that she had a lamp and a supply of oil—and she lit it, and hung it from a hook set beside the door. The lamp was a small one and looked barely adequate, but the golden walls picked up the light and reflected it, and the room was suffused with a soft, bright glow. The only other things in the room, aside from the loom and the skeins of yarn and the three-legged stool, were a thin straw pallet and a woolen blanket folded upon it. None of the windows had glass or coverings upon them, and this room looked as though it got cold enough on winter nights to freeze the marrow in a living being; the blanket looked woefully inadequate against this. But oddly enough, Anouk was not cold. She completed the circuit of the room to find nothing more than another tiny door that opened into what looked to be a privy. That was all.

She crossed to the loom and inspected the tapestry. It showed no obvious pattern or design that she could immediately discern, nothing that she could use as a starting point to continue where it had been left off, but there was a thread still attached which looked as though it had been abandoned mid-weft—and she sat down and reached for it.

It seemed to...vibrate...gently underneath her hand. As though...it were breathing.

Anouk gentled it, whispering softly to it as she might have whispered to her feverish little sister, soothing. Before long, the whisper had turned into a soft tune, into something almost like a lullaby. And somewhere underneath it all she sensed the others who had been here, the restless ghosts of the dead Queens. Their presence. Their frustration. Their...their fear.

She heard their names, shivering like a breath of wind through dry autumn leaves. The names carved under the statues on the Walk of Queens—five, and a sixth yet to rise.

Gisela. Hedwych. Katryn. Mirthe. Stefana. Viona.

Her hands found a rhythm. Beneath her fingers, the threads wove together, knit, and began to find a pattern born in her soft, hummed lullaby.

Why did they die? How did they die...?

“They were easily distracted....”

A voice, from nowhere, as if in answer to her question. Anouk kept her eyes on her work, kept on humming.

“...are you easily distracted...?”

Anouk did not respond.

“...are you afraid...?”

“No,” Anouk said softly, “I am not afraid.”

“You will be,” the voice said, and she almost felt lips moving against her ear, the words poured into its shell like secrets.

“What is your name?” Anouk asked.

“That is what they brought you here to find,” the voice said. “When you have finished the tapestry, you will know.”

“And I will finish it,” Anouk said.

“Then you will have to work without stopping,” the voice said. “Because let me tell you the rest of the story, the part that they tell none of the Queens before they are brought here. I am under a geas to stop you from completing this task, at any cost. What they did not tell you that whatever work you do on that tapestry, I will begin to unravel, the moment your hand leaves the thread. As fast as you do, I will undo. And when they come for you at the end of your seven days...you will die. As all of the others died before you.”

Gisela. Hedwych. Katryn. Mirthe. Stefana. Viona.

Anouk bent her head, and focused on her hands, on their steady, constant motion. And all the while the whispering voice was all around her, wrapping itself around her fingers until it took a conscious effort to move them, tangling in her hair, echoing in her mind. There was nothing coherent about the stories that it told, and it seemed to trip easily between one dead Queen and the next, but it told of them all—about all the women who had come here to find out the name of the spirit who haunted this place, and died trying.

One of the Queens had been driven mad by that voice, apparently, and had jumped from the high windows to her death. At least two of the others had been found here sitting quiet and idle and quite mad before the half-unraveled tapestry, with no trace left that they had done any work on it at all, and had died quietly before the sun had set on the day after they had been taken from this room.

“I showed myself to all of them, in the end,” the voice said, whispered, hinted, quietly threatened. “And when I did they all went mad. Every Queen. And then they died.”

“I am not a Queen,” Anouk said.

She had glanced up and out of the windows, every so often, at the beginning. After a while, she stopped doing that. She lost track of time. All that existed was the tapestry, and the prophecy—and the more she worked, the more the tapestry revealed, and the more she understood. And the greater her pity grew, because she understood more than any of the other women had done; she had got furthest in, had seen the pattern almost complete.

“He stole my skin...he stole my love...he stole my life...and thought I was done,” the voice said into Anouk’s ear.

“Who did?” she asked quietly, her hands working the loom. She had not slept, had not eaten, in she could not remember how long. Her fingernails were ragged, her fingertips raw and bloody, leaving small smears of her blood on the tapestry.

“A war of mages. A war of mages. And Gisela paid the price first because she did not understand—ah, she, she made me—and I....”

The first of the Queens. The one who had jumped, apparently. The one who *did* know too much.

“What happens,” Anouk asked, “if I find the true name?”

“Then I am free,” the voice whispered.

“So why then are you killing the women who were sent here to complete this tapestry? If you had allowed them to complete their work—any one of them—you could have been free a long time ago.”

“I set up the tapestry. It was to be my key, my release. But then *he* set the doom upon me, that I must unravel every night the work that was put in during the day. A war of mages.”

“Who is he, then? And who are you?”

“I...I am...I am the King...” the voice was barely there now, just an echo in her mind. “And he is...he is...he is...”

“His is the name which is revealed by this tapestry, is it not...?” Anouk said, her own voice dropping into a whisper.

She was close. So close. The tapestry was almost done. The basket of yarn was almost empty. The sun had risen and set several times, she was aware of that, but had lost count of how many. Soon, now, they would come for her. Soon.

“It is a skin,” the voice inside her head said, softly, softly. “It is a skin. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said the tanner’s daughter, who had seen many skins stripped from the bodies which they had contained. Who was not a gently-reared maiden, nor yet a Queen. “I understand.”

“Then see,” the voice said. “Look, and see.”

Anouk, without stilling her hands, allowed her eyes to slide off her work for just a moment and light on the vision she was being offered. She said nothing, allowing her gaze to linger there only for a moment before bringing it back to the almost-completed tapestry. But that one glimpse had been more than enough—she knew what had driven the other women out of their minds.

The shape of a naked man’s body, losing cohesion, writhing muscle and bone, dripping blood, bulging eyeballs in lidless sockets, bared teeth in a lipless face.

She was weaving a skin. A skin woven of magic and revenge. A skin that would reveal the name of the ghoulish man who had stolen a King’s face to wear as his own.

“Do you know,” the skinless man said, hanging in mid-air before her just beyond the tapestry, just beyond her range of vision, “what you need to do?”

“Yes,” Anouk said. “I know.”

“It is the morning of the eighth day,” the wraith said. “He comes.”

And Anouk pulled the last thread across, and made it tight, and tied it off.

“I am done,” she said.

With aching and bloody hands she struggled to release the finished tapestry from the loom, scrabbling at knots—it was loose but she was still holding it on to the frame when she heard the key turn in the lock and the footstep that came into the room, and then stopped.

“Your Majesty,” she said, without turning.

“You...are done,” said a man’s voice behind her. If she had not understood this game before now, she might have been puzzled, even distracted, by its joyless inflexion—she would have thought that this outcome would have been the pinnacle of the King’s expectations, finding the woman locked into the tower, alive and sane after her seven days incarceration, the tapestry of the prophecy finally completed, everything about to turn out well.

But things were never as they seemed.

There is a rot at the heart of the Kingdom.

There is a curse that can’t be broken.

“I am done,” Anouk said. And turned, with the tapestry in her hands, staggering a little in her exhaustion but still steady enough to accomplish her purpose, flinging out the tapestry before her, high and wide, so that it fell and settled over the shoulders of the figure of the man who called himself the King.

He saw it coming, too late, and tried to scramble back—but the room was too small to allow him to run. He screamed as the tapestry touched him, crumpling to the floor as it curled around him, wrapping him inside it, bigger than it had seemed to be in Anouk’s hands, growing where it needed in order to stretch everywhere it was required, enfolding the man and, as it did so, turning him into something else, something different, something twisted and malignant and evil and hideous to look at as it crouched hissing and snarling on the floor just inside the door of the golden room.

“Your true name is Rum Pelt Stilt,” Anouk said. “And this is Rum Pelt Stilt’s skin, woven of enchantment, the thing that shows you in your true shape.”

“I...laid...a spell...on it,” the creature on the floor hissed and wheezed, writhing. “It could never be completed by a Queen who laid her hand to it...”

“I am *not* a Queen,” Anouk said. “I am a tanner’s daughter. And I know a thing or two about the skin of a living creature.”

“But I will make you a Queen,” said a voice behind her, not a whisper any more but real and solid and belonging to a man made of flesh and blood...and his own proper skin. “If you will it. Today you have given me back my life, and my Kingdom—and I am forever in your debt, Anouk, tanner’s daughter.”

Anouk, too weary to move, barely turned her head enough to look.

A man wearing the face of the King she had just reduced to the gargoyle on the floor stood beside the empty loom, the blanket from the pallet she had not slept on now wrapped around him like a toga, and looking every bit as royal as the one whom she had destroyed.

“I am Floris, and this day you have freed me from the evil spell that had kept me trapped here—a malevolent spirit doomed to prevent my own freedom by destroying those whom I had hoped would be able to release me. He...wanted my life, that creature there. He wanted Gisela, the woman I loved, for his own. So he laid his plans, and he worked his spells, and seven days before Gisela and I were to be wed he came to this place, and we fought in this high room, and he took what he wanted from me. I remained here, helpless, bound by his words—and yet...and yet...I managed to keep enough of my own magic woven into his to lay the path to my redemption for one who understood.”

“He married Gisela,” Anouk said. “And he sent her here, because he had to, because that was a part of your own counterspell. The woman he made his Queen had to lay her hand to this tapestry.”

“Yes,” Floris said. “But she was not strong enough—or else seeing me in the shape which I showed you earlier broke her heart, destroyed her mind.

Perhaps she loved me too much to bear the knowledge of the truth. Her blood is as much on my hands as it is on his—I, who loved her, helped destroy her. Her, and all the other Queens who came in her wake. Until you came.”

“But I was not a Queen.”

“They told him it was too soon,” Floris said gently. “Too soon to add another to the Walk of Queens. And enough of humanity had bitten into him that he bowed to that, and chose to offer the crown as a reward, this time, and not sacrifice yet another Queen to the game. And you...you came up here, up from the land, rooted in the soil of the realm, and you looked out of the windows of the high room, and you were not afraid—you said it was beautiful. And for the first time, I heard not fear...but courage, and humility, and hope.”

He reached a hand out to her, but she bowed her head, hiding her own hands in her skirts.

“No,” she said, “my hands are....”

But he took one of her hands, and held it very gently in both of his own, and brought it up to his lips to kiss her ruined fingers.

“Your hands are a miracle,” he said. “I will honor every cut and score and scar that you have put on them for my sake. And in those hands I place it all—this land, which you called beautiful, and the King whose soul you just saved.”

From the windows of the golden room in the highest tower of the castle, standing side by side, they watched the winter sun spill over the land, and all was sharp and new and clean again in that cold clear light of a brand new day.

Of Rats and Cats and Teenagers

Irene Radford

The sound of weeping drew me to the fading rural community of Sweetgrass. I sensed the deep, silent mourning of a soul without hope. I heard in those tears an opportunity to help, and a chance for a trade.

Let me introduce myself: Cinnamon Schtick, Fairy Godsister At-Large. Are you missing something vital? Chances are there is someone in this world with a surplus of that very item. To them it's a plague. To you it's life itself. So we Fairy Godsisters work the trade and everyone is happy. That's my job and I take pride in keeping the world balanced.

To those of us in the profession, a trade is like a meal of steak, baked potatoes, Caesar salad, and pecan pie. I am always hungry.

So I followed the sound of deep distress behind the weeping and popped in on Emma. Old-fashioned name. Old-fashioned lady, living in a generations-old farmhouse that was falling apart at the seams. The farm wasn't in any great shape either. My freshly pressed cinnamon-colored overalls, straw hat, and tight braids seemed too neat for the setting, so I faded a little.

Emma looked like everyone's favorite grandma with white hair twisted into a knot on top of her head and the smell of baking cookies in the oven as her only perfume. She was small and as dainty as the antimacassars on her threadbare easy chair. Who could resist rushing to her rescue?

She wasn't startled to find me sitting on her coffee table, sucking on a cinnamon candy. She'd been a school teacher in her younger days. Not much surprised her anymore.

So, after brief introductions, Emma told me her story. "There aren't any young people left in Sweetgrass. They all left to find jobs and excitement in the city. Oh, dearie me, I do miss them." She heaved a tremendous sigh and dabbed at her eyes with a lace-trimmed hankie.

I dabbed my eyes, too. She ignored the sticky cinnamon stains on my linen.

“I haven’t had children in the school in nigh on twenty years. Now, those of us who are left in Sweetgrass are too old to have more children and too frail to properly work the farms. There is no money left to pay the taxes,” Emma finished her tale, slapping my sticky hands for wiping them on my overalls.

“But this is a nice town,” I protested. “No crime. No pollution. People ought to be fighting for the chance to live here. Surely we can find something to bring people back.” I sucked on my stinging knuckles, making sure I eliminated any left-over sugar.

“We did have some excitement once.” Emma’s mind drifted away.

I let her ramble. Sometimes the client’s memories are the key to making the trade.

“We had a plague of flying rats.”

“You mean bats.”

“No. Rats with wings. The creatures ate everything in sight, and oh, so vicious. They were filthy and carried diseases. We tried everything, traps and nets and guns, but the rats were too smart. They simply flew above or beyond our reach.”

“So how’d you get rid of the nasty little beasties?” I’d never met a flying rat in my wanderings. Didn’t think I’d want to either.

But a memory nagged at me. Something sounded familiar. I just couldn’t put my sticky fingers on it.

“Our ordinary house cats sprouted wings.” Emma clapped her hands in delight. “They caught most of the rats. The rest flew away to someplace less dangerous to them. People came from miles around to see our winged cats. But now that there aren’t any flying rats, the cats don’t need to fly. Every last cat keeps its wings hidden.” She petted two purring balls of fur who shared her chair. A third jumped into her lap to get its share of affection. From the kitchen I heard two more playing a game of keep-away with a dust ball.

Emma scratched the cats' ears and beneath their chins. The purrballs obligingly craned their necks and yawned, showing long teeth. "There is nothing exciting about our kitties now, except there do seem to be too many of them—no teenagers to chase them away with their pranks and loud music. Without wings to make them extraordinary, no one comes to see them. No one comes here at all. Except the tax collector."

Who needed the menace of flying rats when you had tax collectors?

This situation required some research. With hasty excuses I popped out of Emma's living room. I emerged with my hair tucked into a neat chignon at my nape, half-glasses perched on the end of my nose; ankle length A-line skirt in a deep rust color and creamy blouse. Very conservative, very respectable—you know, typical spinster librarian garb.

The card catalogue for complaints against over-zealous tax collectors took up an entire wing. Ironically, so did the complaints against governments that refused to fund various activities due to lack of funding. Emma's problem came from not so obvious sources.

Flying rats stank of magic. As well as other things.

Acting on the surest of evidence, my gut instinct, I sought out reports of outlawed magic.

This card catalogue took up only one shelf in the arcane arts reference wing. I opened the drawer to the catalogue. Three moths, a tornado of dust, and a mouse flew out. I sneezed delicately into a clean hanky. Then I reached for the first item.

Usually I needed to hunt through hundreds of useless bits of information.

This time, the card latched onto my dusty palm before I could think about lifting it for closer examination. Something of the urgency of the problem leaked through the card.

I read the bold-faced type with care.

Former Sister Macadamia Knuckt

Banned from all contact with

Cats

Rats

&

Teenagers

Forever more.

Or until she repents.

Repent? Fat chance of my ex-comrade in arms against universal problems ever admitting she might have made a mistake. She kept coming back like a bad aftertaste.

The catalogue led me to a fat tome—also covered in dust—of judicial actions taken by the League of Fairy Godmothers. But I did not need to read the lengthy trial proceedings. I knew that Sister Macadamia had created the flying rats just so she could concoct a neat solution to them and thus earn extra gold stars in her file.

She had of course been caught in the act and removed from the ranks of the sisterhood. She had been made—shudder—*mortal* and mundane. What worse fate for a Fairy Godsister than to become one of the victims we were created to rescue?

That could happen to me if I did not find a solution to Emma's problem. Fast. My stomach growled. The number of gold stars in my file diminished rapidly with each passing moment. I really needed a scoop of cinnamon ice cream. No time. Not enough gold stars.

I popped back into Emma's living room...er...parlor. She hadn't even noticed my absence while she reminisced about cats and rats and the teenagers she had taught in school.

Just then, I heard a new set of tears from a whole group of people three towns to the north. Their compounded distress drew my attention away from Emma.

I interrupted her monologue with, "Would you be willing to trade all of your cats for some healthy teenagers?" There are always too many teenagers in this world.

Emma nodded, tears of tentative joy in her eyes.

"Would you love those teenagers with all your heart?"

She hugged the breath out of me and soaked the bib of my overalls with her tears.

“Let me see what I can do.” I closed the interview with Emma as fast as I could.

o0o

“What’s up, Mr. Mayor?” I dropped into Greengrass City Hall, three towns north, wearing my favorite red-brown business suit. My bright auburn hair was tucked neatly away into a chignon again. Not nearly so severely as when I was a librarian, though.

Mayor Merritt stared at me like a fish drowning in air, mouth opening and closing uselessly, eyes bulging, face the same color as his over-stuffed, over-starched shirt. So I handed him my card.

He breathed a little easier and confided in me. That’s another trick we Fairy Godsisters do. We make it easy for people to talk to us. Can’t tell you how. Trade secret.

“Teenagers. Lazy. Ungrateful. Think the world owes them a living,” he babbled. “And their music! Loud, obnoxious, no melody at all. And who can understand the words? Enough to drive a parent crazier.”

“So, what else is new? They’re teenagers. That’s their job.”

“We try to teach them responsibility and the value of money. What do they do in return? They lie and they cheat. It’s worse than if they just stole the money from us!”

“Sounds a little more serious than a normal teen. How do they cheat you?” I made myself comfy on the edge of his desk and leaned over him solicitously.

“We pay our children to catch those nasty rats that fly through town in swarms. Pay them well, too. What do they do? They steal an already dead rat from the garbage heap and tell us they just killed it so we’ll keep paying them for the same rat carcass day after day and they don’t have to work for the money. If they hadn’t scared away all our cats with their music and nasty pranks, or if they weren’t so lazy and selfish, Greengrass would be free of rats. We have two plagues in this town now, flying rats and cheating teenagers.”

“I think I can help you, Mr. Mayor.” Excitement pounded in my chest. A trade. A big trade. Enough to fill my file with Gold Fairy Stars. Enough little stars to buy all the cream cheese and cinnamon bread I could eat. I popped a red candy into my mouth to tide me over, mindful to keep my fingers clean.

“Mr. Mayor, would you be willing to trade your lying teenagers for some flying cats to catch your swarming rats?”

“Yes, yes. A dozen times yes.”

“Would you love those cats with all your heart?”

“Sister Cinnamon, if they end the problem with the rats, we will worship those cats.”

I made the trade.

oOo

Five years later I heard Mayor Merritt crying once more. A repeat client deletes gold stars from the files so quickly I’d become anorexic. I wanted to make him happy again. Fast. So fast I didn’t have time to change out of my bronze taffeta ball gown. Cinderella would just have to wait a moment.

“What ails you now?” I sipped at a glass of cinnamon iced tea. I was flustered and hot and anxious to solve this man’s problem before it became my problem.

Before I suffered the same fate as Sister Macadamia.

“The cats don’t fly anymore,” he wailed, pushing three of them off his desk. Two more brushed against my rustling skirts, trying to sneak beneath the petticoats.

“Do they need to fly?” Hardly. A red-brown one jumped from the top of the bookcase to the desk to my arms so fast I dropped the tea glass. It shattered on the floor and three more cats appeared to slurp up the sweet drink before it stained my gown. I shooed them away from broken glass, but six more cats replaced them. Easier to dissolve the glass into sand than keep the cats away from it.

“Well, no, the cats don’t need to fly,” Mayor Merritt replied. “The flying rats are gone. Then we had a tourist boom when word got out about our

flying cats. We made so much money we didn't miss the teenagers at all. Tourists didn't come to see cats without wings. Business has fallen off. We're in a recession. But does that keep the cats from eating and breeding? No. We have so many cats, people go hungry trying to feed them."

His belly was now flatter than mine. I believed his tale of woe.

"We have so many cats people can't afford to have more children to grow into teenagers who will scare them away with their music and their pranks. There isn't enough food in this town for both people and cats."

I noticed.

"I'd trade all of these cats for one teenager," he moaned.

"Let me see what I can do."

I checked back with Emma and the three strapping young men who worked her now prosperous farm. Five years ago, they had been Mayor Merritt's sons.

"Do any of the young people in this town want to return to Greengrass?" I asked sweetly. "I'll trade the town some cats."

"No thanks," the young men replied in unison.

"Why not?" This was sounding serious. Hunger awoke in my belly just then, reminding me how fast the little gold stars were draining away. How close I came to joining their ranks.

"No one in Greengrass really loved us," the eldest Merritt boy, now a handsome young man of twenty-one, explained. "They just wanted to use us and when that didn't work, they blamed us for all of their problems."

"Isn't that what teenagers are for?" Hey, give me a break, I said I was a *Fairy Godsister*, not a *Fairy Godmother*.

"That's what we used to think," Emma replied, petting the cat I still held. "Now we know better. Teens are still our children. We loved them through messy diapers, whooping cough, and tying cats' tails together. Why can't we love them through rebellion, loud music, and the need to test boundaries? Though I do miss having a purring kitty in my lap on a cold winter evening." The cat I carried began to purr loudly. I shoved it into Emma's arms.

“Other people’s kids are angels; our own are useless,” I commented. The rule of the ages.

“No cats, Emma!” the boys proclaimed.

“Just one little kitty? He’ll keep the mice in the barn under control,” Emma pleaded.

“Maybe one.” The youngest boy petted the cat in Emma’s arms. A loud purr threatened to drown out our conversation.

“Fix the cat first,” the eldest reminded them all.

“So what am I supposed to do about the plague of cats over in Greengrass? I’ve got to make a trade, fast.” My tummy ached with emptiness.

“Where’d the flying rats go?” Emma cooed at the cat.

“As soon as I find out, I’m back in business.” For a long, long time. If I followed the migration of the rats with a passel of cats to trade, and spread the rebellious kids around to new families who were so desperate for children, they’d even take a teenager, music and all....

Since people never know what they love most until they lose it, I’d be doing them favors trading in endless circles. “Sister Macadamia, I love you!” I proclaimed to the Universe at large.

Visions of promotion to Fairy Godmother danced in my head—promotion guaranteed a maintenance budget of gold stars.

So, as long as rats are a menace, cats breed, and teenagers rebel, I foresee an endless supply of gold stars and rich food. “Don’t suppose you boys have any cinnamon ice cream in the house? Just a little to keep me going.” I may not be a Fairy Godmother yet, but I know who rules the refrigerator in the house.

Stars forbid! Does being a Fairy Godmother mean I actually have to have teenagers of my own?

The Tinderbox

Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

Ivan was a town-boy. He understood streets, sidewalks, lamp posts, crosswalks, and buildings that groped their way toward lowering skies. He knew how to walk on asphalt and navigate concrete canyons. He found his current surroundings perplexing. The soft, raw earth challenged him to tread upon it; the trees crowded out a sky too distant to contemplate; the absence of traffic signs confused him.

It was precisely this last factor that had put him in his present predicament. He had been with two other members of his unit patrolling the Great Smokies near a place called Sandymush, pretending to be behind enemy lines, when the lack of signage undid him.

Now he was alone on a narrow deer track, wishing with all his heart to see a marker that proclaimed: “Unit Field Maneuvers Base Camp—.5k.” But there were only deer droppings and the little split treads of cloven hooves.

Perhaps, Ivan thought, they were not deer at all, but satyrs on their way to a revel deep in the woods.

Now, what had made him think that? He’d read of such things as a boy, but could not recall having ever believed in them...not really. The asphalt and orderly chaos of Omaha, Nebraska wouldn’t allow it. Orienting himself by the sinking sun, the length of shadows, and the conviction that he had entered this tiny valley from a certain direction, he shouldered his pack and followed the deer track uphill.

Just as he was doubting his choice, the deer/satyr tracks gave way to boot prints. Ivan moved forward with a great sense of relief. He had begun to have humiliating visions of his buddies returning to the woods to collect him. “Wrong Way Baransky,” they would call him, “The Clueless

Corporal.” He’d have been laughed out of the Army. Now it was merely a matter of following the boot tracks until he rejoined his unit.

Or so he thought.

But it was not his unit he found at the end of the deer track. When he broke at last from the verge of the forest, he stepped into a clearing in which sat a tiny, squat log cabin. Smoke curled from the chimney pipe; moss crept over the shingles of the roof; chickens scratched in the yard like inflated, flightless pigeons. On the ramshackle front porch an old woman rocked in a chair that looked as if it had been constructed of raw tree branches.

Ivan stopped dead in his tracks and stared, his eyes searching the clearing for a hidden photographer or painter—this had to be a stage setting. But there was no lurking *paparazzo*. There was only the old woman, who had now seen him.

“Well, how d’you do, soldier boy? What’re you about, wandering these woods?”

“Hello, ma’am,” said Ivan, whose mother, no less than the Army, had schooled him to politeness. “I was on maneuvers with my Army unit, and well...I got separated from them. Do you know how to get back down to Highway 63?”

“An Army man, is it? And a fine, strapping boy you are, too. Strong, I’ll bet.”

“Yes, ma’am,” agreed Ivan politely.

“Well, son, I’d be pleased to be of service to one of America’s finest.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Ivan, trying to keep the abject relief out of his voice. If he made nothing of it, he thought, this old woman might not realize the absurdity of an Army corporal who got lost on maneuvers.

“You’re welcome, soldier. Now I wonder, since you’re such a big, strong fellow, if you’d mind helping out an old granny by doing a couple of chores for her that she can’t do herself?”

Ivan slanted a glance at the sun, chafing at the thought of returning late enough to his comrades to receive their jeers. But his mother had raised him to be courteous, and his father had instilled in him that a real man was *always* and ever ready to come to the aid of others—especially the aged,

weak, and helpless. And this dear granny, with her mop of white hair and her wizened apple face and her birch twig arms, was most certainly helpless.

“Of course, ma’am,” he said dutifully, and the old woman smiled, showing a full set of very white teeth. This surprised Ivan so much that he was immediately chastened for having had the unworthy expectation that anyone living in these benighted hills must be unkempt and unhealthy. He pulled himself to his full height and asked, “What do you need me to do, ma’am?”

She started her chair to rocking—*creak-creak-creak-creak*—then said, “Oh, you must call me Granny Krakow. That’s what everyone calls me, for that’s where I’m from.”

“Yes, ma’am—Granny Krakow,” he answered.

“Now, here’s what you do. Go back down that deer track one hundred paces. On the right, you’ll see a great hollow tree pointing up at the sky. It’s as big around as four men and as tall as five, and has a great gap opened up in one side. Now, there’s lots of old, dead trees in that clearing, for they were struck by lightning long ago. But this tree, of them all, is still alive and puts out green.

“Now, when you get to this tree, you climb down inside it into the ground. There’s a cave under it, see, that these old hill folks used for hiding themselves and their treasures, and, I suspect, runaway slaves as well. When you get down into the cave, you’ll find three tunnels. At the end of each tunnel is a door and behind each door is a chest guarded by a dog. Each chest has a different treasure. And you can take as much from any of them as you want. I don’t need the riches, myself. I only want my old granny’s tinderbox. It’s in one of the rooms.”

“A tinderbox?” asked Ivan, ignoring the sheer weirdness of the request. “What’s that?”

“It’s what you start your fires with, boy. A lot of us out here don’t have electricals. Can’t afford ’em—don’t want ’em. And this is going to be a harsh winter coming, so I’ll want that tinderbox.”

“What sort of treasure will I find in the tree?” asked Ivan skeptically.

She gave him a sly grin. “Oh, you’ll see.”

“And what about these dogs? Won’t they bite at me? You...you don’t want me to *kill* them, do you?” He laid a hand on his M-16 as he said this and Granny Krakow let out a peal of laughter.

“You’ll need something better than a gun for these dogs,” she said. “These dogs are *special*.” She rose from her rocking chair, untied her apron, and held it out toward him.

Perplexed, he came to the porch and took it from her.

“Now, the doggies may growl and they may snarl and they may snap, but you just take Granny’s apron and spread it out on the floor and tell each pup to get down and sit there. Then, when you’re done taking the booty you want, put the doggie back and move on.”

“And you want none of the treasure? Wouldn’t that do you better than any old tinderbox?”

“Nope. Not a dime. And it’s not any old tinderbox—it was my granny’s. Only bring it to me and I’ll thank you by showing you how to get back to your buddies.”

Boggled and a bit embarrassed—for surely everything the old woman said was sheer nonsense—Ivan took the apron and paced one hundred steps into the woods. As he went, he concocted a story to deliver to Granny Krakow in lieu of her tinderbox, which he had no expectation of finding. He would say, he decided at about thirty paces, that the tree had fallen completely over and no cave could be found.

But fifty paces later, he had to change his story, for there stood the trunk of a great century oak, its branches naked except for a few leaves that were just beginning to turn color. And just as Granny Krakow had said, there was a rent in the hollow trunk the width of a good-sized man and nearly five feet in height.

Yes, but, Ivan thought, there can’t possibly be room for a man inside this hole.

He put his head inside the broad trunk and saw that indeed there was room.

Yes, but there's certainly no cave beneath. I'll just tell Granny Krakow it was sealed up tight.

But when he'd squeezed into the crack, he found there was a deep hole beneath his feet, and that he fit down inside it quite nicely. There was even a strange, uneven staircase carved out of root and rock. Amazed, Ivan descended into the dark.

Yes, but there won't be three tunnels, he thought.

But of course there were.

He turned on the powerful flashlight mounted atop his rifle and eenie-meened his way to the left-hand tunnel. At the end of the tunnel was a pine door, held together with wooden pegs and leather hinges. Ivan thought it must be very old. He opened it, holding his breath.

A pair of huge, red eyes gleamed at him in the gloom, far from the floor, yet set strangely close together. Ivan gasped and brought his gun to bear, then laughed aloud in relief. Atop the large pine trunk that sat against the far wall of the little chamber was a tiny Chihuahua with great, bulging eyes the size of quarters and ears like miniature sails. The little thing quivered all over and uttered a tiny *yip!*

Chuckling, Ivan laid Granny Krakow's apron out on the floor, pointed at it, and said, "Down, pup!" The dog obeyed immediately.

Ivan opened the trunk. It was filled to the top with fresh, crisp twenty dollar bills. All were dated 1920.

Bearing in mind that he could take whatever he wished, Ivan emptied his pack without hesitation and stuffed it full of money. There was no tinderbox to be found here, and after a moment of thought, he popped the tiny doglet into his jacket pocket and moved to the next tunnel.

At the end of the second tunnel was a door of cedar held together with brass nails and brass hinges. Confident now, Ivan opened the door and flashed his light within. The dog of this room was a German Shepherd Dog with eyes as big as half-dollars. It pricked its ears and growled, as if to protect its cedar chest.

Quickly, Ivan laid out the apron and coaxed the dog onto it. It came obediently and lay on the apron, panting happily.

The cedar trunk was filled to the top with crisp, new fifty dollar bills, all dated 1950. Ivan did not hesitate to empty his pack and pockets (except the one in which he carried the Chihuahua, which he'd already named Chickpea) and refilled them with fifties. Again, there was no tinderbox—something Ivan still regarded as fictional—so he returned the Shepherd (which he'd named Shep) to its roost, wishing he had a pocket big enough to hold it.

The door at the end of the third tunnel was of oak with iron nails and hinges and straps of iron. It swung open ponderously to reveal a pitch black chamber with two large, wide-set, red eyes staring out. Undaunted, Ivan shone his light in and revealed a larger room that contained a gigantic oaken chest strapped with iron bands. Atop the chest was the biggest, most beautiful English Mastiff Ivan had ever seen. Its paws were as big as Ivan's hands and its eyes were the size of silver dollars. It was growling at him deep in its throat and bared its sharp, gleaming, white teeth. But the apron had worked before and it worked now. Ivan had no sooner laid it out on the floor than the dog leapt from the chest and curled up upon it, blotting it from view.

Ivan opened the trunk and found it filled to the top with one-hundred dollar bills, all dated 2000. Amazed, he emptied out his pack and pockets again and refilled them with the crisp, new bills. He even stuffed some under his helmet. He found the tinderbox fastened to the inside of the lid by a leather strap.

He picked it up. It fit easily in the palm of his hand—a little metal box with no distinguishing marks except the initials ISB, which were etched into the lid.

How odd is that? Ivan thought, for those were *his* initials.

He shook the box and it rattled. He opened it and peeked within. There was only a flint and a steel and some twists of dried linen. Shrugging, he put the tinderbox into his breast pocket with the little Chihuahua. His pack and pockets bulging with one-hundred dollar bills, Ivan Sergei Baransky reluctantly returned the Mastiff (which he'd named Gunther) to the top of

the chest and retraced his steps up the rough stairs and back to Granny Krakow's cabin.

"Well, where is it?" the old woman demanded when he reappeared. "Where's my tinderbox?" Her eyes bright and her head cocked pertly to one side, she reminded him of a robin.

He drew the box from his pocket (in which Chickpea snoozed) and handed it to her.

"Well, thank you, sonny," said the old woman. "And now, I suppose I should tell you how to get out of these woods."

"Yes, Granny," said Ivan politely. Curious, he said, "That must be a very special old tinderbox. Whose initials are those on the lid?"

Granny Krakow narrowed her eyes and said, "Why do you care?"

"Well, it's just that those are *my* initials—ISB—and I just wondered what made it so special that you'd want none of the treasure. There's enough money in that cave to buy a million tinderboxes."

"That's none of your damn business, soldier boy. Now, shut up about it or I'll not tell you how to get out of here."

"Hey!" objected Ivan, "that's no way to talk! My mama taught me you should always be polite."

"Polite-shmite!" snapped Granny Krakow. "Your mama's an *alteh machashaifeh!*"

"Now, that's the limit," said Ivan. "My mother's no witch! By the hair of her head, you'll get as you deserve. *A broch tzu dir!*"

"What?" said Granny Krakow. "*What* did you say? Did you just mama-curse me?"

"Well...." mumbled Ivan, feeling suddenly ashamed. "Yeah, I guess I did."

"Phooey!" said Granny Krakow and disappeared with a sound like the popping of a cork. The tinderbox dropped to the wooden slats of the cabin's front porch with a clatter.

Ivan stood blinking stupidly for some time, then explored the little house, even climbing under the porch in search of a trap door or secret tunnel.

There was none. But where Granny Krakow had stood was a little pile of ash that blew away on the fresh autumn breeze.

Ivan tucked the tinderbox back into his pocket and peered about the clearing. The tiny dog in his pocket poked out his head and yipped.

“Well,” Ivan sighed, “this is a fine mess, Chickpea. How will we find our way out of this wood?”

“Yip!” said Chickpea and leapt from Ivan’s pocket to the ground. The little dog dashed to the verge of the wood where it turned and barked once more.

Well, imagine that, thought Ivan. “Clever pup!” he said aloud, and followed along behind.

The Chihuahua led him away from the cabin and past the treasure tree and quite suddenly, as he stepped beyond it, he knew exactly where he was. It was as if a veil had been lifted from his eyes. He scooped up his pup and found his way back to his unit. He was very late, took quite a ribbing for getting lost, and drew KP duty as well, but he hardly cared, for Ivan Sergei Baransky was a very rich man and had a loyal companion to the bargain.

Ivan left the Army soon after and began life as a civilian very well off indeed, for he invested his money wisely and well. He bought a beautiful house on Dodge Street in Omaha and, for a time, lived happily among the wealthy in a beautiful neighborhood where he entertained his friends and family at every opportunity. And it was during these high times that Ivan first heard of the Duchess of Dodge Street, Miriam Feldman. Her father was a successful cattleman who owned a chain of steakhouses in the Omaha area. He was widely known in those parts as the Burger Baron.

“She’s something to see,” said one of Ivan’s buddies. “Hair the color of a sunset and eyes like jade. Skin soft as rose petals and a smile....” He rolled his eyes to say that there were no words for such a smile.

“If she’s that beautiful,” said Ivan. “I’d certainly like to meet her.”

“No chance of that,” said his friend. “Unless you’re Orthodox. Jewish, that is.”

“I am Orthodox,” Ivan said sadly. “Russian, that is. That’s important, is it?”

“I’ve heard a rumor that her family consulted an old-fashioned *opshprekher* who told them she’d marry a goy foot-soldier, which this close to the Air Force Base gives pretty good odds. Nobody’s seen her since she graduated from high school. She goes to an exclusive girl’s college and when she’s home, they keep her under lock and key.”

“An *opshprekher*?” asked Ivan, whose Yiddish was limited to curses he’d heard his mother mutter beneath her breath.

“Some sort of palm reader, I guess. Or maybe they use tarot cards. I forget.”

“I *was* a goy foot-soldier,” Ivan observed hopefully. “Maybe I’m the one she’s destined to marry.”

His friend merely laughed and slapped him on the back. “Not a chance, my man. Her daddy’d never let you near her.”

Ivan was utterly fascinated by the very thought of the Dodge Street Duchess, and began to devise a plan to see her. While he was busily spending his money, he decided to spend some of it in Efraim Feldman’s flagship restaurant on Leavenworth. He ate there every night of the week, setting up a standing reservation. After one month and one week of this, his patience was rewarded; the Dodge Street Duchess came into the restaurant on her daddy’s arm.

She was everything his friends had said and more—statuesque, elegant, radiant. Her skin was creamy velvet, her hair russet silk, her voice a melody. In the space of five minutes, Ivan had fallen hopelessly in love.

Yet, even as he plotted how to meet this superlative young woman face-to-face, his funds dried up. Unfortunately, Ivan had not chosen his friends as wisely as he had chosen his investments. They admired Ivan himself not nearly as much as they did his money, and found many clever ways to part him from it. Ivan was a trusting soul. He could not even imagine doing such a thing to anyone, and so lacked the imagination to see that it was being done to him.

And where he’d once invested wisely, he’d more recently allowed his alleged friends to advise him. They had advised him out of his Dodge Street house and his fat bank account and into a tiny two-room cottage behind a

barn on Saddle Creek Road. And once he was there, Ivan Sergei Baransky discovered that he was quite alone. His friends had deserted him, except for one or two from his childhood days, and they were just as poor as he. Other than that, there was only Chickpea. Ivan had always fed Chickpea what he himself ate, but now it was he who shared the dog's fare. He took a low-paying job to pay his rent and tried to find contentment with his simple life.

"You're a true and loyal friend, Chickpea," Ivan told his little dog. "I know I'll never meet the Dodge Street Duchess now, but having you for company makes things at least bearable."

One cold, rainy evening Ivan went to light his wood burning stove and found he'd no matches left.

"Well, that's that, Chickpea," he said. "It'll be a cold night for us. I've run out of matches and I've no way to light the fire."

"Yip!" said Chickpea, and dashed into Ivan's tiny bedroom. When he came trotting back, he had old Granny Krakow's tinderbox in his mouth.

"Clever boy!" said the amazed Ivan. "You're the smartest dog I've ever seen, and the truest friend."

Ivan tucked a piece of dried linen in among the twigs and branches he'd collected, then struck the flint against the steel. Even as the tinder caught, Ivan heard a piping voice say, "What's your pleasure, master?"

Ivan turned. The dog was talking to him. "Huh?"

"I said: What's your pleasure? What can I do for you?"

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. Would I lie to you?"

"I'd like some money, if it's not too much trouble."

"No problemo," said the Chihuahua. "Just let me outside."

Ivan was reluctant to do this for, as he told Chickpea, "You're the only friend I've got."

"Don't worry, boss," said the dog. "I'll be back spit-spot."

Ivan wasn't sure exactly what "spit-spot" meant, but in less than an hour there was a diminutive "Yip!" at the door, and in came Chickpea, dragging a bulging bag several times his size. It was full of twenty dollar bills.

Ivan went out and bought a lighter and a bag of groceries. He and Chickpea dined well and warm that evening, and in the morning he opened a checking account and paid his heating bill.

“This is a slow way to rebuild my finances,” Ivan mused. “It would be better if I could get more money at once.”

Then, with a logic that only works in dreams and fairy tales, Ivan theorized that if striking the tinderbox *once* summoned Chickpea to his aid, striking it *twice* might bring a dog of greater magnitude. He struck the tinderbox twice and immediately heard a tenor bark at the door. It was Shep, the fifty-dollar dog, who soon brought his master a bag of fifty dollar bills. Three strikes summoned Gunther, the Mastiff, and netted Ivan a bag of one-hundred dollar bills nearly twice the size of the massive dog.

Now, Ivan was curious and not a little worried about the source of his new wealth. But when he asked after it, Chickpea, who seemed to be the only dog of the three who could speak, assured him that it was from the trove of Granny Krakow, and that the trove had been lawfully gained. Sure enough, when he checked, Ivan saw that that the twenties were from 1920, the fifties from 1950, and the hundreds from 2000.

“Can I ask how you got it here in Omaha? North Carolina’s not exactly next door.”

“You can ask,” said Chickpea, and said no more.

The provenance of the money mattered not at all to the bank into which he deposited it or the brokerage that invested it, and Ivan soon retrieved his fortunes and his Dodge Street address. Naturally, his old friends reappeared as well, eager to renew acquaintances. But Ivan Sergei Baransky was not the Clueless Corporal of old. He had learned the lesson they taught him only too well and refused to be taken in by them again.

This left poor Ivan feeling quite lonely and wishing he had someone besides his three faithful dogs to share his bounty with. One morning he struck the tinderbox and summoned Chickpea.

“What’s your pleasure, boss?” the pup asked.

“Chickpea, I’m lonely. I’d like to share all of this with another person. Specifically, I’d like to find a wife. More specifically, I’d like to marry the

Dodge Street Duchess. I don't suppose you could bring her to me the way you bring me money?"

"Women are kind of tough to fetch, boss."

"Then what can I do? I want to meet her."

The pup considered this for a moment, then said, "Take me for a walk in the park behind your house."

Ivan did as asked; he put the little dog on a silken leash and began to walk him down the length of the long, green sward. Suddenly, the Chihuahua bolted the length of the park and slipped between the wrought iron pikes of a tall fence.

Puzzled, Ivan followed, and found himself peering into a beautifully groomed yard. Chickpea was nowhere to be seen.

"Chickpea!" called Ivan. "Here, boy!"

"Is this your dog?" asked a melodious voice.

Ivan jerked upright—for of course he had been peering at the ground—and found himself staring into the startlingly green eyes of Miriam Feldman. In her arms was his own little doglet, looking quite pleased with himself.

"Ah, *there* you are, Chickpea, you bad dog," said Ivan with far more calm than he felt. "I'm sorry, miss. I don't know what got into him—he just bolted. I think he saw a squirrel. He fancies himself quite the hunter."

The Duchess' laughter was like the trill of a clarinet. "I think he's charming. Chickpea, is it? Well, that suits him perfectly." She held the little pup up eye-to-eye; he cocked his head pertly, barked once, and kissed Duchess Miriam on the cheek, making her laugh again.

Oh, lucky dog! Ivan thought. Aloud he said, "He's a shameless flirt, too, as you can see."

She smiled brilliantly and handed Chickpea back through the fence. "I'm Miriam," she told him and he felt as if she'd just given him a jewel.

"I'm...I'm Ivan," he said and shook the hand she extended through the pikes. On a whim, he raised it to his lips and kissed it. "Thanks for not being angry at Chickpea."

She blushed, compounding her beauty. “Angry? How could I be angry? Chickpea is as charming as his master.”

Ivan returned her smile and her hand, took Chickpea home, and fed him half a fillet mignon.

o0o

That night at dinner, Miriam gave the elder Feldmans a bubbling and humorous account of the adventures of Chickpea, Squirrel Hunter. Her parents chuckled good-naturedly until she reached the part of the story where the dashing and attractive young dog owner kissed her hand.

“A young *man*?” repeated her mother.

“Attractive?” echoed her father.

“And very sweet. His name is Ivan.”

Mr. and Mrs. Feldman exchanged glances.

“Is he Jewish?” asked Mr. Feldman.

“Efraim!” exclaimed Mrs. Feldman.

“Daddy!” exclaimed Miriam. “I only returned his lost dog. I certainly didn’t ask such a personal question. What would he have thought? I’m sure I’ll never see him again.”

There was just enough wistfulness in that last sentence to send Efraim Feldman to the kitchen for seltzer.

o0o

Two days later, Ivan was back in the park. Once again, Chickpea slipped his leash and bolted for the Feldman’s back yard. Miriam was there to collect the mighty hunter and smile at his master through the bars of her opulent Mediterranean-style prison.

“I’ve always wanted a pet,” she told Ivan, “but poor Daddy’s allergic to animal dander. Goldfish aren’t very cuddly.”

“Well, then I’ll lend you little Chickpea once in a while so you can have proper cuddles. I have two more dogs at home—a German Shepherd Dog and an English Mastiff. Would you like to meet them?”

“Oh, I’d love to, but my parents are...well, a bit overprotective, really. I know they only do it because they love me, but I really would like to get out once in a while. Without ‘The Nanny.’”

She glanced over her shoulder at the house that reflected elegantly in the swimming pool behind her.

“Wait for me in the park by the playground,” she said and sent him away.

She kept her promise and met Ivan and Chickpea at the Kiddie Kastle. They walked the shaded path to Ivan’s house, three blocks distant, both enjoying the walk and the talk so much that neither noticed they were being followed by a man in a three piece suit, and a blue and red striped power tie.

Miriam loved the dogs and they loved her. She played with them in Ivan’s spacious back yard, throwing balls, watching their clever tricks, and rewarding their performances with doggy treats. All the while, she and Ivan talked and laughed, while Ivan, for his part, fell ever more in love.

When the sun began to wane, Ivan walked his Duchess home again, taking along all three dogs. Shep and Gunther strolled placidly with Miriam, while Chickpea rode high on Ivan’s shoulder. As they stepped into the park, Ivan noticed the strangest thing—a man’s red and blue striped tie was dallied about the third upright of his back gate.

“How odd,” Ivan murmured, and gave it no further thought, but Chickpea whined and leapt from his master’s shoulder to disappear back into the yard. Ivan was torn—should he go back for the dog? But no, Miriam was awaiting him. He hurried to catch up with her.

When Ivan returned to the house, he was relieved to find the little Chihuahua waiting for him at the back gate. But here was the strangest thing—every fence of every house on the row sported an identical blue and red striped necktie on the third upright of its gate.

“Did you do that, Chickpea?” Ivan asked his smallest dog.

“Yip!” said Chickpea.

Later, Ivan caught the little fellow watching something from the rear window of his second floor den. Curious, he peered over the pup’s head and saw Mr. Feldman and a second man—a tieless man in a three piece suit—in

the park behind the row of houses. They seemed to be looking for something. They walked up and down the path, peering into each yard. They stopped and argued and gesticulated with much gusto.

At last, Miriam's father tore a necktie from a fence, threw it at the other man, and stomped away.

o0o

"A soldier?" repeated Miriam, turning from her mirror. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason," said her mother. "*My* first love was a soldier, that's all."

"He's not my first love, mama," Miriam said, blushing. "Why, I barely know him—except to know that he's funny and sweet and dotes on his dogs. I think he said he was a writer or something. He does a lot of volunteer work."

"Have you asked how he earned his money?"

"Mama! That would have been rude, don't you think?"

"Yes, but you know how your father is...."

"Mama, he's obviously a successful young man—hardly a criminal. I never even went inside his house. I only walked with him and played with his pups." Miriam smiled, recalling it. "Oh, and they're so clever! They do wonderful tricks."

"Wonderful tricks, is it?"

Miriam and her mother both turned to see her father standing in the door of his daughter's room. "I'll show you a wonderful trick, my girl. If your young man shows his face here again, I'll have him arrested. And you are not to see him or his clever pups again!"

"Daddy, what *are* you going on about? You sound like the evil king in one of my fairytale books. I'll see him if I want. I'm a grown woman, after all, and I like him."

"This is the way you honor your father and mother?" cried Efraim Feldman. "This is the way you show your regard for your father's health? Look at my face! Look at my eyes!"

Miriam had to allow that her father's eyes, quite apart from being about to pop from his head, were watering something fierce and were red and swollen to boot. And his face was a mottled burgundy, as much from allergies as from apoplexy.

"That's right," said Efraim Feldman. "Here you come, tracking dog dander all over the house while your poor old father suffers such—" And he let out an explosive sneeze.

"But, Daddy—"

"Don't 'Daddy' me! No more dogs! No more strange young men!"

"How strange could he be and live on Dodge Street?" Miriam asked reasonably. "He's a journalist. And he must be a good one, to afford a house here."

"I don't care if he's the king of journalists! What sort of man trades upon the charms of Chihuahuas, or seduces a girl with German Shepherds, or hides his intentions behind Mastiffs? An unscrupulous man, is what!" he exclaimed in answer to his own query. "Now, until I find out what sort of fellow this alleged journalist is and recover from my allergies..." He sneezed once more for emphasis. "You, my girl, are *grounded*!"

"But I'm twenty years old! You can't ground me."

"Twenty-shmenty! You live in my house; you eat my food; you go to school at my expense. If I say you're grounded, you're grounded!"

And that was that. Though Esther Feldman tried to reason with her husband, he remained firm in his resolve.

"If she wants young men," he told his wife, "I will bring her battalions of young men. But I will interview them first."

When several days had passed and Ivan had not seen Miriam in the park, he walked his dogs the several blocks down to her house. As usual, Chickpea darted into her yard. He was back again in a trice. He had seen only the gardener, who'd chased him away with a pruning hook.

Ivan tried to connect with Miriam for the better part of a month. Then one evening, at the end of his rope and with Chickpea at the end of his leash, he stood in the twilit park behind the Burger Baron's house, despairing. He had almost decided to march up to the front door and present

himself when Chickpea bolted, slipping the leash from his hand. The dog made straight for the Feldman's back fence and leapt between the wrought-iron pikes.

Aghast and hopeful, Ivan threw himself after, only to find the gate locked. He called, "Chickpea! Here, boy!" in a stage whisper, but the dog did not come.

Ivan stared up at the back of the house. It was dark. Screwing up his courage, he climbed the fence with great care and dropped over into the soft grass on the other side. He heard the jingle of Chickpea's collar from across the darkened pool and made his way around it, barking his shins on a chaise lounge and twice nearly tumbling into the water. He found Chickpea sitting regally before a set of French doors, quite as if he expected a butler to arrive and let him in.

"Chickpea, there's no one home. We won't see Miriam tonight," said Ivan, reaching for his leash. At the precise moment he realized the doors were ajar, Chickpea scooted through them into the house. Ivan took a deep breath and followed.

Inside, the house was dark and Ivan could track the dog only through the minute sounds of its passage—the whisper of the leash across the carpets, the *tick-tick-tack* of tiny claws on wood and stone.

Creeping toward the front of the house, Ivan at last saw light leaking through a half-open door and onto the polished marble of the foyer. As he drew near, he saw Chickpea standing with his pert snout thrust between door and jamb, his diminutive body at quivering alert.

Ivan drew up behind him, ready to scoop him up, but the moment he reached the door, the pup slipped through into the room. Consternated, Ivan straightened, pushed the door open, and stepped in. Chickpea was nowhere in sight, but Ivan found himself standing face-to-face with Efraim Feldman's assistant.

"You!" said the other man. "You cost me my job! You and your little dog."

Poor Ivan was quite taken aback, but quickly rallied. "Well, I...ah...er.... Say, if you've been fired, what are you doing in the Feldman's house? At

night? When they're gone?"

"Cleaning out my office, thanks to you, Romeo. And I think I should be asking what *you're* doing here."

"I...I came to get my dog."

The ex-assistant raised his eyebrows. "An invisible dog? How...inventive."

"He's not invisible. Just very small."

"What's the meaning of this?" asked a new voice from the doorway behind Ivan.

He turned in surprise, less because the master of the house had returned than because he'd never heard anyone say, "What's the meaning of this?"

"Who are you?" Efraim Feldman asked Ivan, and to his ex-aide, he said, "What are you doing here, Forbes?"

Ivan and Forbes squinted at each other like a pair of gunfighters.

Forbes drew first: "I was clearing out my desk, when I caught this fellow in here, skulking about." He thrust his hands into the pockets of his suit coat and struck a belligerent pose. Then he saved Ivan the trouble of answering *his* question by adding, "This is the young man your daughter has taken up with. You can see where his true interests lie."

Before Ivan could protest, Feldman turned and spoke into the hallway behind him. "You see, Miriam? All the time this boy was romancing you with his clever pups he was planning a burglary."

Miriam stepped through the doorway then, her green eyes finding Ivan. Her mother was right behind her.

"Ivan?" gasped Miriam, "is this true?"

"No! It was Chickpea. He got into your house through the back doors and I followed him."

Miriam glanced around. "Then where is he?"

"Miriam!" roared the Burger Baron. "Don't be dense. That's a ruse—there is no dog."

Ivan had to admit, it certainly looked that way. Chickpea was nowhere in sight. He thought of the tinderbox in his jacket pocket, but knew he'd be foolish to reach for it.

“What have you taken?” Feldman was asking him.

“Oh, I’m sure I caught him before he could take anything,” said Forbes. He strode around the desk and faced his ex-boss. “I hope this will convince you to change your mind about firing me, Mr. Feldman.”

But Efraim Feldman wasn’t listening. He brushed past his ex-amanuensis, went to his desk, opened the topmost drawer, and drew out a carved wooden box. His face paled.

“Well!” exclaimed Forbes. “That’s a fine how-do-you-do! If you’ve nothing to say after I’ve saved your goods from this burglar, I might as well be going.” And he started toward the door.

Feldman continued to ignore him, holding up the wooden box and shaking it at Ivan. “Empty!” he cried. “Broken!”

The emptiness of the broken box registered only peripherally with Ivan. He was still boggled over the fact that he had just heard a man in a three piece suit say, “That’s a fine how-do-you-do!” a phrase he’d thought reserved for maiden aunts.

“Where is it?” demanded Efraim Feldman. Still shaking the box, he advanced on Ivan and backed him toward the wall.

“I don’t know; it ran away,” answered Ivan, whose mind was still on the whereabouts of Chickpea.

“Not your alleged dog, you *putz*! My gold-plated lucky bull’s hoof! A priceless relic from the bull that founded my Angus empire. Now, hand it over!”

“I don’t have it.”

“Hold him, Forbes!” the Burger Baron commanded thunderously.

Forbes, who was trying to squeeze past Ivan on his journey toward the door, grunted in surprise. After a second’s hesitation, he pinned Ivan’s arms to his sides in an iron grasp.

“Daddy!” Miriam protested. “If Ivan says he followed Chickpea in here, I believe him. Chickpea is always slipping his leash. He’s the one that brought the two of us together.”

Ivan was finding it difficult to breathe. “In my pocket...!” he panted.

“Aha!” exclaimed the Baron, and pounced to pat Ivan down. “Aha!” he said again, brandishing the tinderbox, which glinted in the light from the desk lamp. Then, “What’s this?”

“My tinderbox,” said Ivan, hungrily. If only he could get it into his hands, he could summon all three dogs to his aid.

“A tinderbox?” repeated Baron Feldman. “What’s it for?”

“Let me show you,” said Ivan and pulled his arms free from Forbes’ slackened grip. He managed to grab the box and open it, but alas, as he tried to strike the flint to the steel, Forbes knocked the thing from his grasp. It clattered to the floor, the flint scooting under the desk, the box dropping to the carpet.

I’m doomed! Ivan thought as Forbes pinned his arms once more.

At that precise moment, Efraim Feldman let out a huge sneeze. His eyes had begun to water and his face was going blotchy red. “Where’s my hoof!” he wheezed.

“This man has it!” snarled Forbes, squeezing Ivan tighter.

“No!” squeaked Ivan. “I assure you, I’m hoofless!”

“Then where is it?” asked the Baron.

“I don’t know. I didn’t see where it went. But I know someone who did.”

“If you’re referring to me,” said Forbes. “I didn’t see anyone but you.”

“But Chickpea did, didn’t you, boy?”

“Yip!” said Chickpea. He popped out from under Efraim Feldman’s big, mahogany desk and trotted over to Ivan, looking up at him with a wide doggy grin. Then he leapt straight up and fastened his tiny, sharp teeth onto the sleeve of Forbes’ three piece suit.

“Aagh!” cried Forbes, letting go of Ivan and flapping his arm. “Get him off me!”

But Chickpea was not easily dislodged. With Forbes “aagh-ing” and his ex-boss sneezing, and Miriam and her mother both talking at once, and Ivan yelling “Down, boy!” and fearing for the little dog’s life, he hung on until Forbes took a misstep and tumbled over a Louis Quatorze chair.

The man had no sooner hit the floor—and his head connected with the walnut wainscoting—than the Chihuahua let go his sleeve and burrowed

into the right front pocket of his suit coat. When the dog emerged again, his little head was all but obscured by the gleaming chunk of gold he rolled along with his tiny nose. He rolled it right up to the Burger Baron, nudging it between the toes of his gleaming wingtips. It was, of course, the lucky bull's hoof.

"Yip!" said Chickpea.

"Forbes?" gasped Efraim Feldman, bending to retrieve his talisman. "*Forbes* stole my lucky bull's hoof?" He turned to Ivan, red-faced for reasons owing as much to embarrassment as to allergies. "Young man, I've severely misjudged you. Please accept my profoundest apologies. What can I do to make amends? Name it and it shall be yours."

Ivan and Miriam exchanged looks.

"Well, sir," said Ivan as politely as his dear mother would have wished, "I'd like to court your daughter. I'm quite taken with her."

Now, the Baron and Baroness traded looks. "Well..." said the Baron.

"Efraim," said his wife sharply. "You promised."

Efraim Feldman sighed, looking woebegone. "Tell me," he asked Ivan as Miriam cuddled the courageous Chihuahua to her cheek. "You wouldn't happen to be Orthodox, would you?"

Ivan stuffed his hands into his pockets and crossed his fingers. "Yes, sir. As it happens, I am Orthodox."

The Baron's expression lightened. "You hear that, Esther? He's Orthodox. You aren't in the military, are you?"

"Actually, sir, I must confess...."

The Baron paled.

"I must confess that I am independently wealthy, thanks to my old Granny Krakow—may she rest in peace. But I've decided that a man must have a calling and that my calling is writing. So, if you've no problem with an independently wealthy, Orthodox writer courting your daughter...."

He could see by his relieved expression that Efraim Feldman had no problem with that. He uncrossed his fingers and smiled.

Indeed, Ivan Sergei Baransky did become a writer—a writer of modern-day fairy tales. Through the tinderbox, he acquired a major publisher and began his career by chronicling his own story, which you have just read.

Ivan and Miriam were married the day before the release of his first book. They were jetting away on their honeymoon when the book hit the stands, and they were dabbling their toes in the blue Mediterranean when Esther Feldman began to read the copy she had pre-ordered online. She read with growing bemusement until, on page forty-four, she stopped, picked up the book, and went out to the pool where her husband lounged in the late afternoon sun of a balmy spring day.

She sat down on the edge of his chaise lounge and said, “You shouldn’t have cursed the *opshprekher*.”

“And why not? The *alter bok* was dead wrong about our daughter. She married no goy foot-soldier. She married well.”

Esther smiled wryly. “Yes, she married quite well.” She laid the book on her husband’s chest, and murmured “Page forty-four,” into his ear. Then she kissed his cheek, and left him to his reading.

Any Brave Boy

Laura Anne Gilman

There is a story they tell, so late at night the sun begins creeping 'round the rim and the last of the dark-bugs fall silent. The boy in the story is never named; he could be any of them, he is none of them.

o0o

Boy was five when the giant came. Five, but sturdy and smart: already knowing his letters, and helping his mother in the yard, and with the chickens, and the cows.

And the giant came and scooped him up, and away they went, leaving the house, and the yard, and the chickens, and the cows behind. It was higher than he'd ever been, perched in the giant's hand, and Boy laughed to see things from such a height. The giant could cover so much land that soon Boy could no longer hear his mother in the distance, and he did not know the houses or streets they passed.

And then the giant strode up the hill, up and up until they passed the clouds, and still they went up and up, until Boy felt dizzy and fell asleep in the giant's hand, clinging to the giant's thumb.

He woke when they entered a house, and he was shown to a room where there was a bed, and a table, and a chair, sized for him.

"Stay here," the giant said. "Don't leave, and when it gets dark, don't turn on the light."

Boy was still sleepy-sick, and he wanted his mother, but the giant's voice was scary, so he nodded, and promised he would do none of those things.

The giant left, and the door closed behind him, and Boy waited. And waited. And the sun went down, and the room got dark, and Boy couldn't

tell where the door was, or how large the room was. And in the distance he heard a noise.

Someone was crying. Quietly, scared and tired, like they had been crying all their life. Boy wanted to now turn on the light and make them stop, but he remembered what the giant had said, and the promise he had made. If you broke a promise, his mother always told him, bad things happened.

So he stayed in the dark, and did not move, and finally he fell asleep on the narrow little bed, and when he woke up the crying had stopped. The giant let him out and fed him breakfast, and then they sat in the front yard of the house, up in the hills, and played games until the sun went down the mountain, and the moon came up. After dinner, the giant put the stolen Boy in the room again and left him there.

Like the night before, once it got full dark the crying started. It echoed in the room, filling it like the person was there with him. This time, Boy thought “I did not promise tonight, not to turn on the light.” And so he did.

But the moment the light came on, the crying stopped, and the giant stormed into the room, throwing the door open and scaring Boy.

“You disobeyed me!” the giant roared, and he reached for Boy the way his mother would when she smacked his bottom for being bad, and Boy remembered that he had not promised he would not leave tonight, either.

And he ran through the giant’s legs, out the door, out into the front yard, and down the dark road. His heart beat fastfastfast, and his breath came pantpantpant, and his throat hurt, and his eyes watered, but he kept running, all the way down the road.

The giant came after him, his feet thudthudthudding on the road behind him, but the road ended in a fence, taller than Boy and painted white so that it shone in the dark, and he ducked low and scrambled in the grass, squirming his way under the lowest plank. His knees were muddy, and his hands were muddy, and his face was muddy, but he was free, and he sped across the grassy lot, while the giant had to stop and find the gate.

And then he could not hear the giant yelling any more, and his heart started to slow, and his breath started to slow, and he scrubbed at the mud on his hands and on his nose, but that just made it worse.

He walked—slower, but steady, not fast but all night, until the morning came and he saw four men standing around a rose bush, looking worried.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, because his mother had taught him to be polite, and they weren’t giants chasing him, after all.

“We need to move this rosebush,” they said, all four speaking at once. “But we do not know how.”

That, Boy knew. “Dig around the bush, until you expose the roots,” he said. “Then lift it carefully, and bundle the roots in a sack. And then carry it to where you want to put it, dig a hole equally deep, and bury it again. And then water it.” He recited the steps carefully, just the way his mother had told him.

“Thank you,” the four men said. “Such wisdom deserves reward.” And then the first one pulled a hair from his eyebrow and said, all on his own, “Spin it twice, and your strength will be greater than the strength of any man.”

The second man pulled a feather from his hair, and gave it to Boy. “Spin this twice, and you will move more swiftly than the wind.”

The third man scraped at his arm, and handed Boy a scale. “Spin this twice, and you will swim faster than any fish.”

The fourth man plucked at his finger, and handed Boy the claw of a badger. “With this, you can dig to the center of the earth.”

And then they began to dig at the great rosebush, each taking a quarter of the earth.

Boy watched them for a bit, hoping to ask them how he might get down from the mountain, but they seemed to have forgotten he was there, and in the distance he could hear the thumpthumpthump of the giant’s footsteps. So he ran on.

But he could not run fast enough, and there was nowhere else to hide. The giant caught up with him, striking the ground hard enough to make it shake, and demanded, “How dare you run?”

“I broke no promise!” Boy said. “I want to go home!”

“I will kill you before I will release you,” the giant said, and reached as though to grab him once again. Boy, afraid but also angry, twirled the hair

twice, and struck the giant between the eyes, the way his mother did to kill a calf.

The giant fell, but he did not die.

“I will kill you!” Boy shouted, but the giant only laughed.

“You cannot harm me. My soul is not within this body.”

“Then I will find it, and I will destroy it,” Boy said, afraid and angry and trembling-bold.

The giant looked at him, scornful. “Do you think me a fool, to make it easy for any of you? On the other side of the sea stands a post. Hit this post with your finger, and a sword will fall from within. Use the sword to kill a snake in the forest, and a rabbit will appear. Catch the rabbit and cut off its head, and a dove will appear. If you can catch the dove, an egg will fall, and in that egg is my soul. But none of these things are simple: It cannot be reached by any such as you.”

Boy touched the feather in his pocket, and twirled it twice, then ran swift and tireless as the wind, until he came to the sea. Letting go of the feather, he plucked out the scale, twirled it twice, and swam so fast across the sea his clothing barely had time to be soaked.

On the shore, there was a massive, glossy red post in front of a thick, forbidding forest of trees. Boy walked to the post, and tapped it with his finger.

Nothing happened.

“He said I would not be able to do this. I am small. Giant is big. And strong.” And Boy spun the hair twice again, and hit the pole with his finger. The pole shivered, and cracked, and a sword fell from the crack. It was twice as tall as Boy, but when he tried to pick it up; it shrank until it was half his height, and then shrank again until it was just a long knife.

“The forest,” Boy said. “I need to kill a snake.” He had never done that before, but he had seen his mother do it, when one came into the house. Taking a deep breath, he said, “The giant is across the sea. It will take him time to come after me, but he will come.” And with that, he grasped the knife the way his mother had taught him, and went into the woods.

There were deer paths and rabbit trails, but the ground was thickly overgrown, and Boy kept a careful eye, looking for a snake. “Any snake?” he wondered. “A particular snake?” Some of them were useful, his mother said, and should be left alone.

Then he heard a hiss and a slither, and a snake came through the underbrush. It was dark orange like the sunset, and snaked sideways and forward, and it had fangs that extended from its mouth when it saw Boy in its path.

Boy twirled the feather, and fast as the wind, fell on the snake before it could strike, and sliced it in two. A rabbit jumped up out of the space between, sleek and brown-furred, and twitched its nose, then leaped away.

But Boy was still swift as the wind, and he caught the rabbit and lopped off its head. A dove emerged, its white feathers streaked with blood, and soared into the sky. Boy twirled the hair, and leapt after it, high into the air.

His hands closed around the dove, and an egg fell from it, plummeting back down to the ground, so fast and so hard it broke through the ground and kept going, tunneling deep.

Boy landed hard, then grabbed the badger’s claw and twirled it twice, digging in deep after, deeper than he was tall, and then again, until he caught up with the egg, scooping it up in his hands.

It was thick-shelled, and heavy, and would not break. Boy almost cried in frustration, until he remembered that the giant’s soul was inside—he needed to take it back and break it on him.

And so he did, returning to the house where he had been, approaching the yard where he had played.

The giant was there, with another little boy, playing the same games they had played. And Boy hesitated, then remembered the crying he had heard in the room, when the lights were out. He took up the egg and walked into the yard, and—spinning the feather with his other hand—smashed the egg against the giant’s head.

The egg shattered, and the giant’s skull shattered, and he died.

And Boy went home.

o0o

That was the story they told, while the dark becomes light. The details sometimes change—the dove is a bluebird, the claw is a tooth, the giant is a woman, or the four strangers worry over a horse or a cabbage, but the story always ends the same. Because in fairy tales, the giant never wins.

Across Golden Seas...

Elfleda, by Vonda N. McIntyre

Harpies Discover Sex, by Deborah J. Ross

To Serve a Prince, by Brenda Clough

The Rapture of Ancient Danger, by Sherwood Smith

Elfleda

Vonda N. McIntyre

I love her. And I envy her, because she is clever enough, defiant enough, to outwit our creators. Or most of them. She is not a true unicorn: many of us have human parts, and she is no exception. The reconnections are too complicated otherwise. Our brilliant possessors are not quite brilliant enough to integrate nerves directly from the brain.

So Elfleda is, as I am, almost entirely human from the hips up. Below that I am equine: a centaur. She is a unicorn, for her hooves are cloven, her tail is a lion's, and from her brow sprouts a thin straight spiral horn. Her silver forelock hides the pale scar at its base; the silver hair drifts down, growing from her shoulders and spine. Her coat is sleek and pale gray, and great dapples flow across her flanks. The hair on the tip of her tail is quite black. For a long time I thought some surgeon had made a mistake or played her a joke, but eventually I understood why this was done, as from afar I watched her twitching her long black-tipped tail like a cat. My body has no such artistic originality. I hate everything about me as much as I love everything about Elfleda.

She will talk to me from a distance; I think she pities me. When the masters come to our park she watches them, lashes her tail, and gallops away. Sometimes she favors them with a brief glimpse of her silver hide. Her inaccessibility makes her the most sought-after of us all. They follow her, they call her, but only a few can touch or move her. She is the only one of us who can ever resist their will. Even this freedom was their creation; they are so powerful they can afford to play with the illusion of defiance.

But the rest of us, the other centaurs, the satyrs, nymphs, merfolk, we strut and prance across the meadows or wait in the forest or gently splash the passersby, hoping to be noticed.

We dare not complain. Indeed, we should not; we should be grateful. Our lives have been saved. Every one of us would have died if the masters had not accepted us and taken us in. We owe them our lives, and that is the payment they exact. Sometimes I think the price too high, but though nothing prevents me from leaping off the mountainside or eating poison flowers, I am still alive.

The noon sun is warm in the meadow, so I walk toward the forest through the high grass. A small creature leaps from his sleeping place and flees, as startled by me as I by him. Galloping, he surges into the air: one of the small pegasoi. His feathered wings seem much too large in proportion to his body. That is the reason only the smallest pegasoi can fly at all. This one is a miniature Appaloosa pony, not as tall as my knee. Half the meadow away, he touches down and trots off, folding his blue-gray wings against his spotted sides. The larger pegasoi, the ones my size, are spectacular but earthbound; they seek flight but never find it. I have watched one standing in the wind, neck arched, nostrils flaring, tail high. She spread her wings and raised them, cantered against the wind, galloped, ran, but the wings were not large enough to lift her. Our masters use their beasts as they use those of us part human: for amusement, for beauty. It would not occur to them that a flying horse's heart might break because she could not fly.

The shade of the forest envelops me with a cool scent of pine and humus. The loam beneath my hooves is soft. I can feel its resilience, but not its texture. When first I rose, after the operations, the healing, the pain, I could not walk properly. I stumbled and fell and was threatened with punishment if I scarred my bright bay hide. After that, I walked slowly but learned quickly. Human beings did not evolve to articulate six limbs, but we are adaptable. I learned to walk, to trot, to run, and I even learned to move my arms simultaneously, with not too much gracelessness. I did not scar myself, and now my skin—my human skin—is tanned as dark as my red-gold coat. My mane and tail and lower legs are black.

The stream ripples by, loud with snow-water. It splashes down a rock slide into a mountain lake that reflects in its depths another, freer world. There the purple-blue mountains are valleys which could be reached if one

could find them. The mountains themselves cannot be crossed. One of the large pegasoi, seeking the sky, climbed only halfway to a summit before his hooves slipped on the sheer rock and he fell. He broke his leg. Equine legs are a great trouble to heal, so he was put to death, humanely. As humanely as he had been given this life.

The pond's surface moves and breaks, and one of the mer-people glides onto stones dampened by mist. It is the water-folks' favorite place to sun themselves when the icy water chills their memories of being warm-blooded. I think the being is a mermaid, but I cannot be sure from this distance. They are all slender and lithe, with narrow shoulders and long bright hair. The women have hardly any breasts at all, and the men have no proper genitals. They all have only slits, like fishes, concealed among the multicolored scales on their abdomens. I have never seen them copulate with each other, so perhaps the opening is only for excretion and for our owners to use when pleasuring themselves. The mer-people are as deformed one way as I am the other. They have no genitals at all, while I have two sets. I am sure some biological engineer received a prize for clever design. My human penis hangs in its accustomed human place, but above the front legs of a bay horse. My stallion parts are much more discreet, tucked away between my hind legs.

The mermaid flicks her tail, the filmy fin sending out rainbow drops of spray. Another of the merfolk casts himself up beside her. But they do not touch; no intimacy exists between them. Perhaps the feeling has been taken from them, or the cold water slows their passion as much as their bodies.

But, oh, they are lovely. When I wade out to drink, I can sometimes see them beneath the water, swimming together in their own inexplicable patterns, hair streaming gold, silver, scarlet, scales rippling blue, orange, black, all with a metallic sheen. Their tailfins are like gauze, like lace, transparent silk, translucently veined. Their gill slits make vermilion lines across their chests and backs and throats.

They never speak.

If I moved from my hiding place of shadows, the mermaid and merman would disappear beneath the silver surface of the ice-blue water, marring it

with ripples. Two sets of concentric circles would touch, and interact, and fade away, and I would be alone again. I do not move. I watched the beautiful creatures sunning themselves, occasionally flicking water over their scales with their fins or their long narrow hands.

I envy their contentment with solitude, their independence, as I envy Elfleda. She and they are never touched by the games our masters play with us. Elfleda watches from a high pinnacle where only she can climb. The merfolk participate when they are called and commanded, but their eyes are blank. I think by the next day they have already forgotten.

I never forget. I remember every incident that has occurred since I was brought here. Soon it will all happen again.

One of the merfolk swims away, then the other. The forest has chilled me, and I am hungry. The sun bursts warm on my back as I leave deep shade and cross the meadow to the orchard.

Light through the mottled ceiling of leaves dapples my flanks. The lazy buzz of a black fly does not disturb me. Having a long tail, I must confess, can be convenient.

A nymph and a satyr copulate beneath a plum tree, oblivious to my presence. They are as brazen as the merfolk are shy. The satyr's short furry tail jerks up and down as she mounts the nymph and clasps him with her hairy legs. His green hands grasp her hips and move up to caress her pink human flesh. On either side of her spine's erect crest of brown bristles her back is slightly sunburned. The nymph arches himself into her and she grunts, twining her fingers in his curly green-black hair. His heels press the ground, his toes curl, her cloven goat-hooves dig up bits of sod. The nymph moans and clasps the satyr to him. Our creators have no respect for the traditional gender of their creatures. They please only themselves, never myth or legend.

I wheel and gallop away to escape the frantic plunging and gasps and groans in the orchards. I have coupled with the satyr myself, gods help me.

The meadow grass parts before me and the air flows through my mane like water. The birds are silent in the heat but the cicadas' shrill afternoon song urges me onward. My hooves pound the earth, crushing flowers,

cutting the turf. Sweat sparkles in my eyes. I pull my elbows close to my sides against the pain of breathing. The air enters in burning gouts. Sweat pours down my chest, breaks out on my flanks, drips down my legs, and flies from the points of my fetlocks as I run. I feel my buttocks rub the sweat into white foam.

The meadow ends and I run among rocks. I leap a huge boulder and come down in scree. The valley narrows, rises, and ends in a sheer wall of stone. I stumble, stop, stand spraddle-legged, knee-locked, and try only to breathe.

Later I realize I still have a plum in one hand and a peach in the other. The juice, where I clasped the fruit, runs between my fingers. I tear the pulp with my teeth and swallow it slowly until all that is left are the seeds. Fruit trees are hybrids; they reproduce only freaks, sports, throwbacks. I fling the seeds among the jumbled rocks, where they will have no chance to grow.

The sweat dries on me as I plod down the mountain. A dull ache creeps up my near hind leg from the center of my hoof. I think I have a stone bruise.

Back in the meadow I lie down in deep cool grass. I am never comfortable sleeping now. When I stand, like a horse, my head droops and I wake with a backache. Lying on my side with my head pillowed on my arm is awkward, and my hand always goes to sleep.

The shadow of the mountain is creeping over me when I wake. It will be dark soon, and the moon will be full. I fling out my forelegs and push myself to my feet.

A flash of white among the trees draws my attention.

“Elfleda!”

She stops and turns toward me, tilting her head gracefully to draw the spiral horn from beneath the branches. She has small breasts and long, strong hands. Human skin blends into animal hide at her navel, but like the rest of the equiforms she has human sex organs between the beast forelegs. Our owners must have bred and chosen Elfleda’s animal part carefully, for it is both horse and deer, with a musky taint of goat. She lashes her tail.

“Hello, Achilles. What do you want?”

“I...” But I want nothing from her that she will give. She is not cruel, only detached. She does not feel for me and I have no reason or excuse to expect her to.

“They’ll come again soon,” she says.

“I hope not.”

“They will.”

“And you’ll watch for them.”

“Yes,” she says. I do not understand, since she can ignore almost all of them, why she does not disappear into the forest when they come. Instead she watches, and our masters see her and grow jealous of her freedom.

What they give, they can take back.

Elfleda flicks her tail again. The black tip touches the point of her horse-shoulder, her withers, her flanks. The wind lifts her short fine hair away from her head, away from her back, haloing her in silver light. I step toward her, and she does not back away. But I am covered with sweat and dust and I smell like hot horse, hot human. I am embarrassed to approach her like this. She watches me, waiting, unafraid. She knows she could outrun me if she had to. They made me large, taller than I was in life—in real life—but she is quick and her hooves are sharp; and they did not take away so much of my humanity that I would force myself on her. That would be bitter love indeed.

“I wasn’t thought ugly before—” My voice is querulous. I should not speak to her like this, as if I would be content if she took me out of pity.

She frowns, then her brow clears and she steps toward me. “If you were, Achilles, you know it wouldn’t make any difference to me.” She reaches out: I can feel the heat of her hand near my face. She has never touched me before.

I draw back and turn away. “You still don’t find me attractive.”

“That isn’t fair.”

And even now I do not look at her, though I know she is right. “You’ve accepted their rules. Nothing holds us to them.”

“Do you think not?”

“What keeps you from loving me?”

“We love, or we do not love.”

“We let them control us.”

“We cannot stop them,” she says, and again I know she is right. Between the times of their coming I want to believe we could all resist them, if we tried, and I blame our obedience on our weaknesses and our guilt, our willingness to be controlled and thereby absolved of all responsibility. But when the compulsions come to me—

Elfleda touches my arm and I start violently. She jumps back, as surprised as I, her other hand still raised, pointing toward the sky where she sought to draw my attention.

“Look.”

Darkness has fallen. I look at the stars and see a brilliant multicolored light approaching. Above us, our masters ride in a great dirigible that floats majestically over the crest of the mountains. Its engines are nearly silent. Lights festoon its cabin and illuminate the treetops below. It passes directly over us and we hear music and faint laughter. I look down at Elfleda. The lights paint her, red, violet, blue, green. Her expression is wistful, hopeful. She does not look at me.

A sharp cry of delight or distress draws my attention back to the dirigible. When I look down again, Elfleda is gone.

But what does it matter? What does she matter? Others desire me, if she does not. If I felt tired and spent a moment ago, I am excited and powerful now. Half the forest lies between me and the meadow, and if I do not hurry I will be late. But the distance is nothing. Evergreen branches brush me with their fragrance as I run. The ache in my hoof is no more than an insect bite.

All of us gather in the meadow, beast and beast-human alike. The little pegasoi cavort and scamper among us and over us, while the flightless ones display their plumage. A gryphon sitting on its haunches on a boulder roars and screeches, and the unearthly light of the aircraft shimmers around us all. The dirigible descends slowly, so immense it blots out the stars. I catch one tether-rope and the centaur Hekate takes another. Hekate pulls harder than I, the muscles in her haunches bulging like fists. The dirigible tilts down on her side and she laughs. We drag the craft to earth against its

lifting force, glorying in our strength, and bind the ropes to trees. Our masters step down upon the ground.

They are ordinary humans, as ordinary as we were before they changed us. They look so strange, walking normally on two legs, hoofless, clawless, hairless. They are small, weak, omnipotent. They smile on us and we wait, hoping to be chosen. They are all as beautiful as flowers. The gryphon bounds down and rubs felinely against their legs.

A silhouetted figure stands in the hatchway of the aircraft, hanging back. He steps down and hesitates with the light flowing across him. His face is coarse, his expression uncertain. He is both curious and frightened.

“Hekate!”

The ugly boy vanishes from my mind. One of our masters is calling dark Hekate, and she obeys, her black hair streaming in the wind of her speed. Her great hooves plough the ground as she stops before the slender young woman. Her horse-part is heavy through the shoulders and haunches, powerful and immense, ebony highlighted through the spectrum by the dirigible’s illumination. In her other life she must have been a formidable and stunning woman, for she is a compelling myth. The young human leaps upon her back and drums her bare heels against her sides, laughing. Hekate wheels and bolts across the meadow, her tail held high like a plume. The vibration of her hoof beats echoes around us.

Two satyrs bound along beside her, as fleet and randy as goats. Their musk mingles in the air with the pungent sweat of Hekate.

A light pressure on my back: “Run, Achilles, follow them.” A nymph clasps me with his long pale arms, his fingers across my belly. I can feel his slender legs around my ribs, but he is weightless. “Run, or they’ll leave us behind.”

I obey as if he were a master. I follow Hekate’s path easily through the trampled grass and silver darkness. I leap an obstruction and realize later it was nothing but the human’s flimsy robe. I gallop through a shallow extrusion of the lake, flinging spray in all directions, passing naked humans who wade toward the rocks of the languorous merfolk.

Hekate and the human stand gilded by moonlight. They embrace, the human standing on Hekate's broad back, leaning over her shoulder, bending around to hold and kiss her. They glance toward me. The human woman laughs.

"What shall we do with them?"

"Exhaust them." Hekate's laugh is low and full. "Exhaust them, and go back to what we were doing."

Copulating in the grass, the two satyrs ignore us all. The nymph slips from my back as I prance toward Hekate. The human turns and sits astride her, facing backwards. She holds out her arms to me; I rear, I mount Hekate as a stallion and embrace the human as a man. She slides her heels over my forelegs and pulls herself onto me. As she draws me down to kiss her I see Hekate bend likewise, as she shifts her haunches beneath me, to caress the gold-green nymph. He is light and thin, but tall enough for her. His fingers clench, nails digging into Hekate's shoulder blades. The human moans and slips her hand down my stomach. I thrust in a single rhythm, and Hekate groans as pleasure washes her in double waves.

Many combinations occur between us. My memory is like diamond-bearing stone, opaque, with sparks of crystal clarity. The human finishes with me, kisses me one last gentle time, and slips from Hekate's withers. When the human draws the nymph away, Hekate leans back against me. Beings move and laugh and touch all around us, forming some immense incomprehensible dance. One of the other centaurs gallops by and throws us a leather flask. I hold it for Hekate, and drink from it myself. The warm wine cools me, and I let it dribble down my chin, drip on my chest and into Hekate's long mane. The taste is strong and sour and the intoxication hits us quickly. Revitalized, I rear back and return to the ground, and Hekate and I canter through the meadow, playing like foals, rearing and striking at a night-pony who sails between us, black batwings sharp as knives. Under a tree we face each other and couple again, while nearby a fully human pair watches and laughs.

The energy of intoxication lasts a few minutes and quite suddenly drains away as Hekate chases me through the trees. I stumble and slow; she passes

me, calls to me, but when I do not follow she snorts and gallops away. I sink down in the soft cushion of pine needles, enveloped by a pleasant lethargy. While I doze, the gold-green nymph returns to me and curls up against my side, trustful among my hooves.

I dream about Elfleda, but the dream dissolves as I am about to touch her, as she reaches for me. I wake and see her, real, before me, beyond a growth of ferns. She does not know I am here.

The ugly human boy is standing before her, head down, hair falling across his face as if to hide it. Elfleda says something to him that I cannot hear, and he looks up and smiles. All his movements and expressions are hesitant. Elfleda takes his hand. He reaches up, touches her breast, her throat, her forehead, her spiral horn. She touches its point to his shoulder and lifts her head again. Together they walk away into the forest. I shiver, close my eyes, and try to sleep again, making myself believe I never really woke.

While it is still dark Hekate returns and lies beside me, back to back so we can lean on each other and have a little more comfort. I expected her to stay with the human.

“Couldn’t you find her?”

“I found her,” Hekate says. I wait; finally she continues. “She sent me away. I suppose she had something better to do.” Her low voice is well-suited for anger, but not for disappointment. She mutters a few more words as we fit ourselves against each other for sleep. In the meadow, only the humans and perhaps a few satyrs will be stirring. I cannot understand what drew the human from Hekate; I would be offended, too, if one of the humans left me for one of the hairy creatures. Nevertheless we obey our masters as long as we are able, whether the orders are to serve or leave them.

Obedience and the night are over for me; I am spent.

The nymph snores and Hekate shifts and sighs in her sleep. I hear laughter, giggling, the command to hush, but the sounds pass over me like a breeze. It must be the humans, searching in a pack for something to entertain them, and I am beyond entertaining.

We have few storms here, but when they come they are violent and long. We know now when to seek shelter, for the gentle wind that precedes them through the mountain peaks has a certain coolness, a certain flavor. My hair rises, all down my spine, for the storm wind and the breeze of words are all too similar.

I move my legs carefully so I will not hurt the snoring nymph, then lurch to my feet. Hekate stirs but does not wake. I am already stiff and sore, and my hoof aches fiercely. But I remember the direction Elfleda and the ugly boy walked, and I remember the way the humans crept after her.

I follow the bruised leaves of their passing, too frightened to call out. Elfleda could be beyond the sound of my warning, and the humans could come back and silence me. I climb as fast as I am able. The ache spreads into my haunches and along the vertebrae strained by my unnatural construction.

The trees end suddenly. Moonlight throws my long shadow against pale granite. The mountain peak is still far above, separated from me by ridges, flat sheets of rock, sheer walls.

I climb the first ridge, my hooves scraping the bare stone. When I reach the top I can see Elfleda and the boy, gilt in the midst of shadows. His hands are twined in her mane and her arms are around his naked body. He moves against her.

They are safe, and alone. I am spying on them, up here silhouetted against the sky, and I am ashamed. I will go back to Hekate's solid warm side—

The moon reflects from ornament or weapon.

“Elfleda!”

As she throws up her head at my warning the humans rush her. The boy jumps away, surprised and embarrassed. The other humans are all around, yelling in triumph, holding nets and ropes to take back the defiance they gave her. The ugly boy looks from one face to another, confused, humiliated: at least he did not know what use they planned for his initiation. He sees the ropes, and strikes one angrily away. Elfleda rears and another

misses her. She charges the humans, head down, and they scatter away from her sharp horn. She is trapped by the mountain and the waiting nets.

I gallop down the side of the ridge. A noose settles over Elfleda's head, around her throat, and slides tight. She turns, flinching, grasps the rope and sets herself back on her haunches, pulling the human off balance. She tears the rope away and flings it to the ground, but another settles around her shoulders. One strikes her hind legs like a snake. Startled, she springs away, and the tension of the rope halts her in mid-arc and pulls her down. She lies stunned, a scarlet burn on her throat, blood trickling from one leg where the rope has cut it.

Laughing, the humans close a circle around her as I near, my hoof beats echoing on the stone. To our masters, this is adventure. Between them I see Elfleda raise her head. She tosses it, as a human approaches her, and her horn opens a deep wound. I reach the crowd and scatter our frail creators with my shoulders. I charge the human who holds the trip-rope; I pick her up and throw her down on the stones.

Our masters have stopped laughing.

Elfleda kicks off the loosened rope and pulls away the other, struggling to her feet. She menaces the humans with her horn and I with my fists, my hooves. They stand back, milling around us. We are all at bay.

"Achilleus!"

She bounds forward and I follow. The humans are raising nets, crying to each other to hurry. One snare drapes low, rippling and tangled. As it rises Elfleda leaps it. I gather speed, collect myself, and jump. The strands graze my forelegs—they must entrap my hind legs—but I kick back and up, the round cords scrape me, and I am free!

I plunge after Elfleda's pale form. Our retreat to the park, where we could hide and hope the masters might forget their anger, is cut off. Elfleda flees toward the mountain and the impassable ridges.

She starts to climb, hesitating when she no longer hears me behind her.

"Achilleus, come on!"

"But where will we go?"

"Anywhere but back—if we want to live. Hurry!"

She reaches toward me in encouragement: she is too high above actually to reach me.

“There’s nothing out there for us.”

She looks beyond me. I turn. The masters are very near, now, confident of their prey.

“Hurry!” Elfleda says again, and I put one hoof on the steep rock. This is desperation. I begin to climb. I scrabble on the stone, straining upward. My hooves are made for meadows and prairies. I can hear the masters just behind me. Trying to go faster, I slip and fall to my knees, crying out at the wave of pain, reaching with my hands to keep from falling. Granite soaks up my blood.

Elfleda is almost close enough to touch me. Did she descend to help me climb?

“I can’t—”

“Try,” she says. “Just try....”

Shining in the failing moonlight, a rope slips over her head as she grasps my hand.

Another noose falls around my throat and jerks me backwards. I fumble at it, struggling to free myself and climb. The rope jerks me again, much harder, pulling me down, cutting off my breath. My bruised hoof slams against a rock spur. The pain completes my disorientation. I stumble again, falling and sliding on the stone. I am lost.

When next I am aware of anything I feel warm droplets falling on my shoulder. I open my eyes, and see the masters leading Elfleda back down the mountain. She is at the center of a web of ropes, around her throat, her arms, her waist, binding her hands, but she holds her head erect. One of the humans reaches out and pulls her black-tipped tail. She lashes out with a sharp hind hoof and turns toward him, but the other humans drag her around.

I lunge up. The ugly human boy reaches out to stop me, too late. I scream and fall back, shuddering, panting, suddenly cold and wet with sweat. When I lie still the pain is only a great throbbing.

“I’m sorry,” the boy whispers. “I didn’t know....”

I push myself slowly up on one elbow, straining to see yet not move my hindquarters. Blood is black in the moonlight, but dawn will soon turn the patch beneath me scarlet. Bones protrude from my shattered leg.

Elfleda and the humans disappear among the trees as I sink back to the ground. I can only see the paling sky and the single human. "Help me...please help me...." But he is wiping the tears from his cheeks, pushing the hair from his forehead. It must be the kind moonlight and dawn that make him appear less coarse, less uncertain. There is no magic here.

"Elfleda," I whisper, and the boy gazes blankly down, as if he never knew her name.

Behind me I can hear the footsteps of two more humans, as they approach me one last time.

Harpies Discover Sex

Deborah J. Ross

Aello, whose name means storm, floated through her dreams, the swirls of darkness and light, earth and water, half-formed memories of the time when everything was one surging whole. The constant motion of the four Elements, forming and re-forming, filled her with joy.

“Awake, snatchers! Awake, sisters of darkness!”

The voice, arrogant and male, shattered the tumultuous harmony. Vaguely, Aello sensed her body, the surrounding cave, her head tucked beneath one iron-pinioned wing. As she’d slept, her physical form had become unstable, as it tended to do when she immersed herself in primal chaos. Quickly she re-absorbed the ass’s ears and jellyfish tentacles. With a vulture’s razor talons, she clenched the twisted olivewood branch that was her perch. Deep scratches, accumulated over the centuries, marked the pale wood.

The sun rose beyond the eastern rim of the Cretan hills, revealing the modern world in all its static form. Rocks, dried weeds, sky, the whitened bones of some hero or other, come to slay the monsters in their den. She sighed.

“Awake!”

At Aello’s side, Celeno, whose name means darkness, ruffled her feathers, shook her chest flaps, and opened sleepy, disgruntled eyes.

Against the waning blackness of the cave, a shimmer of gold appeared, condensing into the shape of a swan. For an instant, the bird’s head turned to that of a bull, horns sweeping wide. The figure of a man emerged.

Zeus.

Aello blinked. The god was naked except for blue flowers threaded in his beard and a tiny silver thunderbolt dangling from one ear.

“Drat!” Celeno muttered under her breath. “What does *he* want?”

He would want something, Aello thought. That crowd on Olympus always did. Why they couldn't settle for being elemental forces, she'd never understood, perhaps because she herself was so close to the origin of things. These new upstart gods were bent on separating *this* from that, man from nature, male from female, nothing but difference and distance.

Zeus glared at Aello's chest and cleared his throat. She looked down at the purple warts which had sprouted in her sleep. Although she thought them decorative, she obediently altered them to firm, round human breasts.

Zeus smiled. "I've got a job for you."

"Someone else to harass for breaking some law which should never have been made in the first place," Celeno grumbled. "Why don't you do your own dirty work?"

"*You* are my dirty work!" Zeus smiled even more broadly. "Why else do you have such a stench, not to mention your loathsome appearance?"

The humans depicted Aello and her sisters as having the talons of vultures and the faces and bared breasts of women. It was certainly what people had come to expect. The Harpies couldn't very well come swooping down as butterfly hummingbirds and get the same terrified reaction. Once they'd tried something more creative, a concoction of scorpion pincers, sea cucumber bodies, and clusters of giant eight-fold spider eyes. Very admirably it had worked too, except the priests complained to Zeus about a new, unagreed-upon scourge and he'd forbidden any more experiments.

At least, Aello thought, Zeus was in a good mood today. He'd probably caught whatever unfortunate female creature he was running after with those ridiculous flowers in his beard.

Sex again! she fumed. *Dividing everything into "innies" and "outies"!* What was the point of it all?

She said, "Who is it this time?"

"Phineus, the blind King of Eastern Thrace, has been a naughty boy."

As Zeus filled in the details, it sounded to Aello like the usual story of bestowing prophecy on some fool, as if that somehow balanced out the loss of vision, and then placing all kinds of restrictions on what he was allowed to say without telling him what they were.

“The usual treatment, I suppose?” Celeno said. “Screeching, laying waste to croplands, carrying off banquets, befouling what we leave behind?”

“You got it, sweetie.” Zeus pointed a finger at Celeno and winked. Then his form dissolved into a curtain of confetti.

With a clashing of metallic feathers, the third Harpy flew into the cave and settled on her perch. Ocypete, whose name means speed, glanced nervously from one sister to the other.

“Uh-oh!” Ocypete hopped to the next branch. “Zeus again?”

“Who else?” Aello shrugged.

“Well, he can wait for his petty revenge,” Celeno said. “I want to know how the plans for the cousins reunion are coming along.”

Aello had mixed feelings about family gatherings, as she had about just about everything else. Iris, their sister by Thaumias, was a sweet creature, if untidy, scattering her rainbows everywhere, but the other cousins could be temperamental when provoked.

“Scylla absolutely insists we hold it at her place. Charybdis is in one of those *moods* again and refuses to travel.”

“We had it there last time,” Celeno whined. The mermaid Sirens hadn’t minded, as anywhere near water and handsome sailors suited them just fine, but the Gorgons had put up an immense fuss and their snakes had sulked the whole time.

“Let’s worry about the reunion later,” Aello said, spreading her wings. Celeno and Ocypete sisters followed. “There’s work to do.”

Aello loved flying. The sky lightened to that pellucid shade which held all colors. Her wings beat strongly, sending their rhythm through her body. Beside her, her sisters soared, their joy overlapping.

After the bright surging foam of the sea, the rocky coast seemed dreary, giving Aello the itch to mix things up. The place could stand an infusion of Water and Fire. Inland had once been fertile, vineyards and strips of golden wheat, but now lay waste. It looked suspiciously as if the landowners had decided that having a prophetic king was enough in itself to ensure prosperity, and had simply abandoned their fields.

They reached the city of Salmydessus. Instead of gleaming white walls and neat tile roofs, beds of bright green rosemary and oregano, a heavy veil of dust, dead vines, and spiderwork cracks dulled every surface. Aello noticed the palace roof was in terrible repair. From inside, she caught the smells of roasted goat meat and pastries, fermented fruits, and toasted nuts.

Ocypete made a quick circuit and decided that the windows were a bit narrow for a suitably spectacular entrance.

“It’s the crash-through-the-roof maneuver,” said Celeno, whose feet always hurt afterward. “On the count of three—”

Together they hurled themselves at the weakest point of the roof and burst into the central hall, shrieking the numbers one to ten in Neanderthal, which sounded suitably fearsome. Sometimes Celeno got a little confused and switched to Esperanto, not that the humans noticed.

In the hazy dust-laden light, Aello spotted King Phineus sitting at the head of the banquet table. A strip of linen embroidered in crimson and gold thread covered his eyes. He himself could have benefited from a little culinary restraint earlier in life.

A pair of armed guards rushed forward, poking their spears upwards. Laughing, Aello dodged their thrusts. She was tougher than a few bronze points. Meanwhile, Ocypete stuffed food into her chest pouches with her usual speed and Celeno took out her temper on the servitors, slashing at them with her talons. Within a few minutes, the room emptied of all except the Harpies and the hapless king.

“My doom has come upon me!” Phineus flailed about with his arms. “Cried the Lady of Shalott!”

“Look, Kingie,” Aello said, settling on the whole roasted kid and inserting chunks into her chest pouches. The inner linings flooded the air with pleasure pheromones. Phineus covered his nose and mouth. “You might as well get used to it. You’ve managed to piss Zeus off and *we* are what happens.”

“Liberté! Egalité! Fraternité!” cried the hapless Phineus.

His utterances began to make a bizarre kind of sense to Aello. After all, prophecy was the ability to see into the future. Zeus just hadn’t said *how far*.

Phineus's subjects, being human, would undoubtedly manage to make sense out of whatever he said.

"Grievously have I sinned," Phineus sobbed. "I revealed that which only the gods should know."

Ocypete, filled to capacity, paced up and down on the table. "So what was it?"

"The recipe for apple strudel. By their fruits ye shall know them."

It took a lot to astonish Ocypete. She baited, her wings churning the air, releasing more gusts of pheromones. By now, every bit of food left on the table reeked of them. "But the Greeks don't *eat* apple strudel."

"Not yet, anyway," Aello said.

"Are we done yet?" Celeno demanded. The walnuts in the baklava gave her hives and she was anxious to dump it in the first available ocean.

"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps on this petty pace," Phineus moaned.

Aello launched herself into flight. "Sit tight, Kingie. We'll be back!"

"Sink the *Bismarck!*" was the King's reply.

Ocypete shot Aello a quizzical expression as they sped back toward Crete. "And this is going to go on for a long time?"

"Until Zeus says enough," Celeno grumbled.

"Or we find some way out of it," said Aello. For the first time, she resented the shared origins which made her subject to the will of the gods. Division and separation seemed like a wonderful idea. Horrified at her own thoughts, she dropped the notion.

The commute itself quickly became tedious, even for hyperactive Ocypete, so they moved to the mainland, where Celeno discovered new allergies to blooming rosemary and to sheep dung. For a time, Aello diverted herself by sorting Phineus's utterances by chronological period, although she never could decide where to put "Ba Ba LOO."

Then the heroes came, as if Torture by Harpy were a magnet for their kind. They were mostly bearded and half-naked, hoping to win Phineus's kingdom and his daughter's hand in marriage, only Phineus didn't have a daughter and by this time the palace was in truly decrepit condition. The

Harpies' daily forays through the roof and back out again, chest pouches bulging with whatever the kitchen had concocted that night, had enlarged the opening considerably.

The heroes bore the usual swords and shields, which they applied vigorously and with no particular degree of accuracy. They also swaggered, used bad language, and had obviously not bathed in far too long.

"And they say *we* smell bad," Celeno muttered as they rested beneath the crumbling Neolithic monument that was their temporary den, discussing the latest forays. She lifted her leg to smooth the crimped feathers of one wing. Primitive weapons couldn't inflict much damage against the Harpies' plumage, even if the heroes had managed to hit one of them.

Aello closed her eyes and pretended to be sleeping. Ocypete had gone off to calm down Scylla about having to put off the reunion yet again. As long as the heroes kept coming regularly, they couldn't reschedule. By the time Zeus relented or Phineus died of starvation, they'd all be downright happy to hold it in Hades.

She sensed a disturbance in Salmydessus. The clashing of swords and body armor, the tramp of sandaled feet, the arrant rush of pride. And food—a shipload of supplies. A new band of heroes had arrived. It was time to get back to work.

As Aello and Celeno neared the town, Aello noted the difference in this bunch. She wondered if they'd come to rescue Phineus like the others, or to consult him about a noble quest. Something shone from within the intruders, a glimmering like gold; two even bore the unmistakable stamp of godly ancestry. She'd never felt anything like them, as if a cold, delicious wind lifted her pinions. Part of the wonderful sensation was that it arose from outside herself and evoked a...*response*.

She said as much to Celeno as they circled above the ruined palace. Celeno snorted, in a worse mood than usual because they had to cover for Ocypete's absence.

Aello swooped into the hall, her eyes adjusting instantly to the dim light. Phineus cowered in his throne, a pathetic wreck of a man. Even the bandage

over his eyes had turned dingy. But this time he was surrounded by a band of warriors in gleaming breastplates.

“Jason! They’ve come!”

“Defend the King!”

Swords leapt from scabbards. Celeno screeched and dodged the nearest blade, talons extended.

“Behind you!” the one named Jason shouted.

In a single graceful movement, the Greek raised his shield. Celeno swerved just in time. Nimbly, she dipped to gather up a basketful of dried figs. Pheromones from her chest pouches filled the air. The men’s faces contorted.

“Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!” Phineus gibbered.

Aello, gathering up a pile of round loaves of bread, assessed the situation. Clearly, this was not a disorderly band like the others. Golden-headed Jason gave his orders in a calm, ringing voice, and was obeyed instantly. Within moments, two of the heroes had raised their shields to cover Phineus from attack. Others moved around the table in a coordinated maneuver, setting the pattern for the defense. With each passing moment, the Harpies’ attacks would grow less effective. Unenthusiastically, Aello started another run at the table.

A hero appeared before her, his bared arms glimmering like marble. She back-stroked, pausing, scenting immortality in his blood. His face, although contorted in battle fury, was comely, the silvery curls forming a halo. But the most astonishing thing was that he had thrown back his short cloak to reveal...wings.

Wings?

Out of the corner of her eye, Aello noticed a second winged warrior bearing down on Celeno, but had no time to watch. Her own pursuer was closing fast. She dodged a sword thrust and stayed just out of reach. Her heart beat unaccountably fast. “What manner of man are you?”

“I am Zetes, son of Boreas, the North Wind!”

Aello had heard rumors, mostly from the Sirens, about Boreas's exploits among the nymphs, but she'd never encountered one of the inevitable results. This Zetes appeared to be in deadly earnest about his mission to protect Phineus.

Fine. She'd let him chase her off and then complain to Zeus there was nothing she could do about it. They'd be off the case and enjoying the cousins reunion within the week. Celeno must have had the same idea because she bolted from the palace, the second winged warrior practically on her tail feathers.

Aello's wings beat strongly, carrying her toward the roof opening. Zetes followed a heartbeat behind. She burst through the clouds and into crystalline blue sky. Hovering, she turned to face Zetes.

Suddenly, Aello forgot poor Phineus, forgot Zeus and his peremptory commands. Let Jason go on to whatever glory awaited him. Her defeat had already become the stuff of legends.

The hero before her was neither man nor god, but a glorious combination. Gleaming wings stroked the air rhythmically, a drum beat. Wisps of clouds clung to him like bits of dream-stuff, air and flesh and water churning most enticingly. He was born of the union of air and nymphly flesh, just as she was the product of earth and sea.

Maybe, she thought, there was something to this male-female business.

Something in her responded like a resonant chord. The flesh of her body, malleable, began to take on a complementary shape. Without her conscious will, she shifted form, chest pouches into voluptuous breasts tipped by rosy nipples, and softened the contours of lips and cheek.

"Begone!" Zetes shouted again. "Begone, foul..." His voice trailed off. "But you are not foul, as was told. You are fair..."

"Men call me foul when I carry out Zeus's orders," she replied. Was that her own voice, so suddenly melodious? "What I want, who I am—that's something different."

Different? She, Aello, was claiming to be different as if it were something good?

Ever since the upstart Olympus crowd had started separating *this* from *that*, rupturing the patterns of elemental chaos, she had resisted the very concept of difference. Resisted it. Resented it.

It had never occurred to her that *difference* might be the basis for attraction, for joy. Or that without separation, there could be no coming together, no completion of one another.

As they talked, they drew closer, wings fluttering. Aello's body continued to change, to...*respond*. Curves matched to his, softness to his hard muscle. His breath stirred the delicate feathers on her neck. He touched one of her breasts confidently, but with wonder. The most delicious sensations flooded through her, so unexpected that she knew she could not have imagined them. Smiling, she enfolded him in her wings.

Together they possessed three of the four Elements, Air and Earth and Water, aching to be recombined most deliciously. They would make their own Fire.

To Serve A Prince

Brenda W. Clough

The storm in January 1997 was the worst the eastern Mediterranean had endured this century, and the royal yacht *Britannia* was in trouble. The ship swooped up and down like a roller coaster on the wind-lashed waves. Down in the royal suite Charles, Prince of Wales, was damnably seasick. His cabin had big picture windows, but the waves scoured right up over them so they might as well have been portholes. And the way the curtains swayed back and forth—ugh! It'd make anybody queasy. "Can't you make this stop?" he demanded.

"Sorry, Sir," the *Britannia*'s captain said, a broad apology that covered the waves, the weather, and life in general all at once. "Weather conditions are worsening. We've radioed for assistance. I have to ask that you put this on, Sir. Just in case."

The picture of restrained British fury, Prince Charles looked tight-lipped at the bright orange life jacket. "Surely you're joking, captain."

"Just a precaution, Sir—please! Her Majesty would wish it!"

This unnecessary appeal to the authority of his mother infuriated Charles even more. "Rather drown," he snapped.

It was an unfortunate choice of words, because the deck shuddered oddly under their feet. Somewhere below, alarm bells began frantically ringing. "Quick!" the captain shouted.

Disregarding protocol, he leaped on Charles and stuffed the princely arms into the life jacket. A sailor burst into the room shouting, "She's sinking!"

"Save the Prince!" the captain yelled. They hustled Charles out of the cabin just in time. The *Britannia* heeled over with a jerk, flinging all three of them across the deck like dice. Charles was so surprised he made no effort to grab the railing as he hurtled over the side.

The Mediterranean was cold enough to make him gasp, and the dark waves were taller than mountains. A slashing downpour made it difficult for Charles to breathe. Hastily he tightened the straps on his life jacket. He couldn't see the yacht anywhere, and night was coming on fast.

Charles had no experience of mortal peril before, and didn't realize how lucky he was to be washed up onto a rocky shore before hypothermia set in. Must be an island, he thought. The seas around Greece are stiff with islands.

His legs were so cold he couldn't stand. It would be undignified however for the Prince of Wales to crawl up the beach. He lay shivering in the surf, knowing that help would come, because for him it always had. Unsurprised, he felt large calloused hands grasping him, hauling him higher over the shingle. "Dash it, pick me up and carry me!" he said, and fainted.

o0o

Charles woke slowly. A fire crackled cozily nearby. He was dry and warm, with something wooly tucked right up to his chin. His once-frigid feet rested on an enormous hot-water bottle in a wooly cover. Sleepily he imagined his rescuers, perhaps a pair of elderly Greek spinsters who knitted afghans and hot-water bottle jackets. He curled his toes into the luxurious nap of the bottle cover.

To his exquisite horror, the hot-water bottle moved away. With a yell Charles sat bolt upright and heaved the covers off. "My god!" he cried. "It's a dog!"

The big sheepdog shot him a disgusted look as it got up. With a disdainful all-over shake of its curly brown pelt, the beast walked away.

Shivering, Charles huddled back into bed. The covers, he saw, were sheepskins tanned with the wool on. The bed was a crude wooden affair, no more than a box to hold the sheepskins in a heap. It stood at one end of a vast cave. The only light came from the big stone fireplace. Impossible to imagine a pair of nice old ladies knitting beside that fire!

He heard footsteps now, echoing from the far end of the cave. Resisting the urge to pull the sheepskins over his head, Charles tried to see past the glow of the fire. The approaching figure seemed fairly ordinary, rather on

the plump side perhaps, carrying a toy oil lamp in one hand. Then with a terrible adjustment of perspective Charles saw that the oil lamp was normal-sized. It was the hand holding the lamp that was enormous. The fellow must be fifteen feet tall. Slowly Charles raised his eyes to the giant's face, and almost fainted again with the shock.

"Phylax the dog said you were awake," the giant growled. "So you recognize me. Just say it, okay? Get it over with."

Charles opened his mouth but no words came out. Diplomacy, that was the ticket. The famous British tact. He swallowed and tried again. "You're one of—of, ah, the binocularly impaired."

The monster clapped a huge three-fingered hand to its bald head. "Oh for dumb! I'm a Cyclops, dammit! Haven't you read *The Odyssey*?"

"In school," Charles stuttered. Unpleasant memories of the Homeric epic returned to him. "You're shepherds—and cannibals!" But a Prince of Wales cannot dive under the covers and scream for mercy—it simply isn't done. Even if the creature ate him on the spot, he had to assert himself. "And I presume you recognize me."

"Yeah, yeah, we get satellite TV. You should just marry Camilla and get it over with. Show Princess Di where she gets off, dissing you."

Charles winced, as he always did at a mention of his ex. The divorce had only been finalized eighteen months ago. "So perhaps you plan to hold me for ransom, rather than serving me up on a platter, eh?"

"Don't count on it," the Cyclops growled. It stared at Charles from under its single shelf-like eyebrow. "You'll have to make yourself useful somehow."

"My pleasure." Charles threw back the sheepskins and got up. It put him at a psychological disadvantage to be in bed, he thought. He found he was wearing a faded red sweat suit, a nasty change from his usual hand-tailored suits. "Just indicate your wishes," he said a little bitterly. "I oblige the entire British nation; a few Greek mythical figures shouldn't be too difficult."

"Don't gimme that! At least you got a role in life!" The Cyclops picked up something from the mantel and tossed it to Charles. "Here, take these—the floors are way cold. It's the big hassle of cave life."

Charles flinched and let them drop—the items looked like feet, a pair of large human feet cut off at the ankles. But when he picked them up, with an effort, they were only sheepskin slippers with the fleece turned in. He stepped into them and followed the Cyclops down the cave.

“Oh come,” he said rallying, hoping to keep the conversation going. “Don’t Cyclops have a role?”

“Sure, one that’s four thousand years out of date. Homer didn’t do us any favor, you know—we came off as dumb.”

“But scary too.”

“Yeah, dumb and scary and shepherds. Whoopee. What do you think of, when you think of shepherds? What’s the first image that pops into your head?”

Charles didn’t need to think very far back. Only last month he’d sat through no fewer than fourteen Christmas pageants in the course of his duties, a schedule guaranteed to shrivel anyone’s holiday spirit.

“Bethlehem,” he said promptly. “While shepherds watch their flocks by night. Away in the manger, no crib for a bed.”

The Cyclops stopped. “Actually, Christmas wouldn’t be a bad gig. Seasonal appearances get you exposure every year. Like the way the leprechauns hijacked March 17th. Nah, what am I saying? One of us tried it a few centuries ago—sneaked into a Nativity fresco with a lamb under his arm. Total fiasco—they painted him over into a Wise Man.” The Cyclops began walking again, shaking its head.

“Let me get this straight,” Charles said. “You Cyclops are searching for a—shall we say a niche in the popular imagination?”

They turned a corner into a smaller, more comfortable cave, furnished with a Greek flokati rug, a battered cafe table and a pair of old bentwood chairs. An old-fashioned wood-fired cookstove was crowded on top with kettles and pots from which delicious smells rose. Charles sat in a bentwood chair. He had skipped lunch, due to seasickness, and now felt distinctly hungry.

Without paying much attention to its work, the Cyclops set two plates out, produced cutlery and cloth napkins from a cupboard, and poured out

two glasses of red wine, talking all the time. “Damn straight we need a niche. There’s nothing deader than yesterday’s folklore figure. Just ask Paul Bunyan. And we’re from the day before yesterday. The trick is to make the transition, you know? Without losing anything essential.”

“And you say other legendary folk have made this jump successfully,” Charles said in the encouraging, interested tone a Royal picks up at his nanny’s knee. “I believe you mentioned leprechauns.”

“You wanna know the real success story? The Nereids. And their cousins, the Dryads and Hamadryads.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“They’re the nymphs of oceans and trees and streams. You’ve had dinner with one—I saw it on CNN. Look!”

The Cyclops reached a big coffee-table book down from the cupboard. Charles stared astonished at the glossy dustcover, which had a photo of a huge curving ocean wave, very blue, on the front. On the back the author, a dishy blonde in a Givenchy dress, stood in front of a yacht. “*Our Living Waters?* But I know her—Constance Bedlington! She’s on the Birthday Honors short list for her antipollution work!”

“Told you! She and the other Nereids have a lock on the clean water stuff. The Greenpeace people, all those groups that monitor oil spills, and shampoo greased-up sea otters, and save whales, and hug trees—nymphs pack all their governing boards. There’s Nereids running water purification plants, and Dryads lobbying against clear-cutting Amazon rainforests, and Hamadryads lecturing at universities on wastewater treatment policy. It’s enough to make a Cyclops sick with envy.”

Charles shook his head in wonder. “Connie Bedlington, a Nereid. Amazing!” He took another sip of wine.

The Cyclops refilled both glasses. “Okay, chow time.” Charles hid his nervousness as the monster brought a serving dish over from the stove. Suppose it was human meat? But the dish was an appetizer, fried calamari—the crisp little brown rings of squid were plainly visible. Charles picked up his fork. “So you eat squid, huh?” the Cyclops said.

“Of course—and these are scrumptious.”

The Cyclops grinned with pleasure at the compliment. “Lots of folks won’t, the wimps.”

The sight of its sharp shark-teeth almost made Charles knock his glass over. “I’m used to eating all kinds of things,” he said, recovering quickly. “Part of the job, being Prince of Wales. I ate a boiled rat once, in Cameroon.”

“A rat? My god!” The Cyclops shuddered all over. “Better you than me, pal!”

“Only one bite,” Charles said gloomily. “If I’d jibbed, the diplomatic scandal would have been indescribable.” He helped himself to more calamari, to get the memory out of his mouth.

“Don’t fill up on that,” the Cyclops warned. “There’s bouillabaisse to follow, and pigeon pie.”

“No human stew, eh?” Charles drained his glass.

The Cyclops looked embarrassed. “That was Homer’s idea, you know. Trashed our image completely. We could’ve got over being one-eyed—look how the satyrs managed their goat legs. But people don’t like people who eat people, no denying it.”

“What are the satyrs into these days?” Charles asked, fascinated.

“Porn, mostly. You don’t believe the male stars in those films are really human, do you? The hassle of shaving goat hair off my legs and haunches every day would put me off, but they don’t seem to mind. Here, you open this white, while I dish up the bouillabaisse.”

Charles had never opened a wine bottle before—the servants did that—but now was the time to learn. The cork broke into pieces when he forced the corkscrew in, and he had to fish the crumbs out of his glass with a fork. The Cyclops pretended not to see his awkwardness, though. Charles decided that Homer had really had the wrong end of the stick—Cyclops were instinctively hospitable. He sniffed the rich garlicky steam rising from his plate and picked up his spoon. “So what kind of job were you Cyclops contemplating?” he asked.

The Cyclops pulled a clam from its shell and chewed it thoughtfully. “I was sort of toying with the idea of starting a Cyclops rap group.” He fixed

Charles with a one-eyed gaze.

Charles kept his face absolutely serious. “Do you sing?”

“Rap doesn’t involve singing. I figured if we wore baseball caps turned to one side folks might not even notice our eyes.” The Cyclops put an imaginary cap on, pulling the bill down and to one side of his face.

“Every rap group that I’ve seen has been African-American,” Charles said tactfully. “Perhaps skin color’s not a difficulty for figures of legend.”

“Well, yeah, it is. No such thing as a black Cyclops. We’re all pasty white—must come of living in caves.” The Cyclops mopped his bowl out with a piece of bread. “You about ready for that pigeon pie?”

“Looking forward to it. Oh, and a red wine to go with it! Delightful!” This time Charles opened the bottle deftly, and poured the new wine out with justifiable pride. The Cyclops congratulated him and set a large dish down. The glazed and shining piecrust had a unicorn design pressed into the pastry. Charles applauded. “By gum, it’s a masterpiece. Could be on a gourmet magazine’s cover.”

“Well, I’ve always admired the pictures in *Food & Wine*,” the Cyclops admitted. It served Charles a portion and watched him anxiously as he took a bite.

“Delicious!” Charles pronounced. “There’s something in the sauce—is it basil?”

“And marjoram,” the Cyclops said. “But I bet you eat as good every day, at home.”

“You’d lose your bet,” Charles sighed. “England is famous for its horrible food.”

The Cyclops blinked its eye in surprise. “No kidding? That’s terrible! But you’re the prince, the heir to the throne. Can’t you just wave your sceptre and say, ‘I want roast duck for dinner’?”

Halfway down the fourth bottle of wine, Charles let it all hang out. “It’d be lukewarm by the time the food hit the plate—the kitchen is so far from the dining room in a palace. Not like your charming cave here.”

“It is convenient,” the Cyclops said modestly.

“And I don’t have a sceptre. May never have one. My mother will be Queen of England until she dies. By then I’ll be an old man.”

“That’s terrible. And what’re you going to do, between now and then?”

“The usual routine. Cut ribbons at supermarket openings. Give speeches to Mayoral Assemblies. Listen to preschool choirs sing ‘The Little Drummer Boy.’ Press the flesh at old age homes. You should’ve rescued a shipwrecked MP if you want help with your image,” Charles concluded sadly. “Or Steven Spielberg. The Prince of Wales is just a figurehead. Powerless.”

“Oh, don’t say that,” the Cyclops said, tears brimming in its eye. “Your people like you.”

“They like my ex-wife more.” Charles knew he was getting maudlin, a privilege he could very rarely allow himself. But his host was in no better shape, snuffling dolefully into its napkin. And a Cyclops was perhaps the safest confidante on earth.

“To tell the truth, I envy your situation,” Charles continued. “We’re both of us anachronisms. Freaks looking for a role. But once you find your niche, I just know you Cyclops will make your mark in the world. I may never do so.”

“Oh, you will,” the Cyclops sobbed. “I’ll help you, if you need it.”

“Would you? Really?”

“Of course!” The Cyclops extended a three-fingered hand the size of a typewriter and, seizing Charles’s hand, pumped it up and down. “Anything! I promise!”

Charles was almost jerked out of his seat by the vigor of the handshake. “You’re too kind,” he said. “And I am indeed going to lend a hand in your problem too. The least I can do, for my rescuer. Suppose—” Looking around for inspiration, Charles’s gaze fell on the immense pigeon pie. “Suppose you moved to England, and gave my chef some hints? Can all you Cyclops cook so wonderfully?”

“Well, sure, but—you mean, cooking? As a job?” The Cyclops’s shark-like mouth dropped in amazement. “Hey, we only play around amongst ourselves—we couldn’t cook like pros!”

“You already do, believe me!” Recklessly Charles drained his glass and poured more for both of them. “I’ve got it now. I’ll go on ahead, and sack the kitchen staff at Balmoral. That’s the Scottish castle where my family holidays. Then you Cyclops follow along to take up the jobs. Scotland’s a lot like Greece, mountainous and full of sheep. You’d fit right in. If all goes well, a few of you could branch out a bit in a couple years—start a restaurant, open a B&B, author a cookbook—I could write you a foreword. Maybe get on the telly with a cooking show...” The entire scheme seemed to leap, fully grown, from Charles’s head.

The Cyclops goggled at him, if a single eye may be said to goggle. “Are you sure? You don’t think that being fifteen feet tall and one-eyed will spoil people’s appetite?”

“No one will see you in the kitchen,” Charles pointed out. “On your TV show you could stand in a trench on the set, to hide your height—actors do that. You could even bring Phylax the sheepdog. Englishmen love people who love dogs.”

The Cyclops jumped up, overturning his chair, and enveloped Charles in a bear hug. “That’s fantastic. You’re brilliant. We’ll be in your debt forever. And don’t think I’ve forgotten your problem. We’ll reform British cooking if it kills us. And you’re gonna get the credit. You’ll go down in history as the prince who gave England a cuisine.”

Tears rose in Charles’s eyes too. “You do that,” he said, “and Connie Bedlington won’t be the only mythological figure on the Honors List.”

An hour later, Charles stood on the rocky shore again while the Cyclops brought around its motorized fishing boat. The storm had almost blown away, with only ravelings of cloud scudding across the moon’s face. Charles clasped his hands behind his back in his customary princely stance. He was still a couple sheets to the wind, but Charles’s head was clear. There was no reason why the relationship shouldn’t be mutually profitable. Palace employees had an excellent dental plan, so the Cyclops could get its shark-teeth capped before kicking off its TV career. And Charles could dine, at last, like a prince, for the rest of his life.

It occurred to him that he had even done Odysseus King of Ithaca one in the eye. Charles of England had escaped from a Cyclops too, and without any ungentlemanly poking about with sharpened stakes either. Just sympathetic conversation, solid British diplomacy, and four bottles of good Greek wine.

“To each hero his own weapons,” Charles said aloud with satisfaction.

The Rapture of Ancient Danger

Sherwood Smith

“Oh, Ari, *at last* we’re past the pig island,” my sister said to me, yawning as she turned her back on the diminishing flock of islands with their white sands and mysterious sandstone cottages. She hunched a shoulder in the direction of the tour guide who had just finished his talk. “That’s it for the gabble.”

She pointed down the deck past the recliners and the buffet and bar to the pool, sparkling in the sunlight. “Tonight’s the dance!”

“Gabble?” I said, looking away from the dark jut of Achaea on the bright green horizon. Fresh, salty air stung my face and I grinned, loving it.

Alexa leaned on the ship’s rail, scrutinizing the new polish on her nails. “Yak. Blab. If I’d known this Mediterranean cruise was going to be so much like two weeks of school—only with really gross smells—I would’ve stayed home with Gran.”

“We’re half Greek,” I reminded her, though the downward snap of her brow dismissed my reminder as unnecessary—even sophistry.

“So Mom reminds us a billion times a day.” Alexa tossed her hair back. “Doesn’t make it smell any better. I thought Greece would be, you know, all castles, and cool. Like Disneyland, only bigger. I don’t think we’ve seen one thing that isn’t broken into a thousand rocks, and then we have to listen to a million hour lecture about each one, and it’s mostly old people around us, nobody *interesting*...” She glanced behind me, and her scowl cleared to a sidelong glance and the faintest curve of her lips. It was the expression that she reserved for cute guys. “At least there’s some fun on this dump of a boat. Finally. I just hope they speak English.”

She moved toward the buffet, glancing over her shoulder again, her long eyelashes lifting then lowering like Gran’s gran, who was French, might once have flicked her fan.

I've tried to mimic that expression, when alone with my mirror. On me, it looks like I'm trying to blink a bug from my eye.

Sure enough, there came footsteps, and a teenage-boy snicker.

I didn't turn to see them—there was no need to. If there were any cute boys in range, Alexa found them, or they found her. Fact of life. It was also a fact that no cute boy would take the slightest interest in me.

I looked back at the horizon, but Achaea was now just a faint line. My own self-righteous words to Alexa whispered to me as if I'd spat into the clean, strong wind scouring my face over the rail from the sea, for I had my own problems with the tour. But they were different from my sister's. Different...no. They were *no* different. The problem was my own: too much imagination.

I turned my back on Greece and its islands and its ever-changing sea.

And that's when I saw the boy who leaned over the rail on the upper deck, hands loose, his head at a slight angle as he gazed down in my direction. My heartbeat tripped, then thundered the way we dash forward to recover our balance when we stumble over something. I thought I recognized him.

Of course I didn't. It was merely that he was handsome, the Greek ideal of male, as Alexa was the Greek ideal of female: long and shapely of limb, chiseled nose, generous lips curved enticingly. Curly dark hair. He just happened to look like one of the cute guys I'd seen...ugh.

I left the rail and retreated to the cabin I shared with my mother and sister; if they asked where I was going, I'd say I was going to practice.

Yeah. Practice. That was what had gotten me into trouble. Keeping a promise to my music coach, I'd taken my flute along on the cruise, and I'd even forced myself to work through fingering drills when Alexa was out of our cabin. Which was a lot, as soon as she found cute guys on board to flirt with.

But I'd been going through the motions for months, and somehow it was even worse now, as if the tiny cabin closed in the music, squashing it down even more flat and mechanical than it sounded at home.

That is the problem with being a child prodigy, my teacher had said. You were hailed so young for your technical expertise, before you ever understood the music you played.

Understood music, what did that really mean? It was a succession of notes. I'd even read that there were mathematical equations for it all. Math explained why we liked music, which patterns were pleasing and why. The world had become a mathematical equation, if one got far enough in school to see the mechanics.

I took out my battered flute case, but what I saw was the first time I noticed that guy—or another version of that guy—on Crete. I stood again in the ancient monastery cut into the rocky mountainside, the sun making a blaze of the narrow stone windows, dust everywhere, even in our pores. The rest of the tour had gone on, but I stayed behind, standing in the worn spot where the monks had stood for years, looking up at the faces painted nearly a thousand years ago. It was like looking into another world—except it was a world with people like me. I'd sneaked along the flute, in case I could get away from the tour for a minute. Just to see if my music sounded different in these old places.

All those saints stared back at me with their broad, flat faces just like mine, and the wide, tilted dark eyes as I began to play the “Song for a Friend,” the oldest piece I could think of, having been written by a Portuguese troubadour 800 years ago.

But as I played, I became aware of the rise and fall of music counterpoint to my own. When I halted, I heard singing, a distant rise and fall of men's voices, blurred with echo off patient stone. The melody was strange to my Western ears, but compelling, peaceful and sad at the same time. *I am missing some kind of show for the tourists*, I thought, and hastily disassembled my flute as I stumbled toward the sound. But when I looked down to stash the flute in my backpack, my head buzzed and I lurched as if the ground had shifted under my feet.

So I sank onto an old stone bench to recover my equilibrium—and then that guy walked into the cool chamber from the sunlight slanting in the doorway, each step sending up a fury of fiery dust motes. *Some guy*, I

corrected myself, with that same unflinching sense of reality that I used when examining myself in the mirror. I thought at the time that he was dressed as a monk, but the white of his shoulders resolved into a shirt, and below, those dark trousers. His long hair was blacker even than mine.

The sense of timelessness snapped into urgency when his dark gaze met mine: I was staring! Prickling painfully with embarrassment, I clumsily ran out, my shoulder and arm thudding into the door frame. I still had the fading bruises.

It happened again at Delphi, when I was leaning on a smooth granite stone, and the others were safely out of sight and hearing. I played a piece I'd heard in a restaurant, "Erotas," composed by Spiro Cardamis. I didn't want to try anything old, and risk that weird dizziness.

The lovely melody spun out, my flute catching the sunlight and reflecting the glints of mica and the flecks of volcanic rock, more ancient even than this prehistoric site, and my music was almost alive again, almost...but when I lowered the flute I heard whispers, scarcely louder than the breeze through the grasses tufting here and there on the empty, rocky hillside.

Was that whisper what the scammers who called themselves oracles heard? Or did they even bother with the breezes? Maybe in the earliest days, they leaned here and listened, imagining the sough and ruffle as words, and I was a young acolyte straining to hear, wanting, so badly, to be the One, to gain the accolade in everyone's eyes as I stepped forward with the words, *I hear the voices of the gods*, and there would be my life before me, respected, listened to, wise and....

Footsteps.

There was that guy. Or *a* guy. His eyes were black, his bones replicated in the silent statues that watched across eternity from colonnaded buildings. Embarrassed to be caught staring, I shifted my gaze out over the fields.

"You stopped playing. What do you hear?"

I jumped, not expecting to be spoken to. But I restrained my urge to stare. He spoke English, his accent strong.

I was not going to get into my dorky Let's Pretend. Only beautiful people could do that, and be acclaimed as charming-imaginative-interesting. Me?

I'd be scorned as a poser, a fake. "Listening to the wind," I said shortly, keeping my gaze on my stubby fingers.

"Ariadne!" Alexa called impatiently from the path below. "We're *finally* leaving this oven. *Will* you hurry up!"

I stole a glance—but the guy was gone, probably around the jumble of stone, and heading down the path himself. Toward Alexa. Of course.

So I stashed my flute and began my trudge back down the hill.

I saw another Greek Ideal at the Parthenon, where my attempt to play was interrupted by the clicking of amber beads. And again at the Acropolis, when I blew reedy chords until the breezes brought the clangor of a thousand bells, each worn around the neck of sheep swarming down a hillside...no. That was the brilliant sunlight reflecting off the white deck umbrellas shading customers who sipped beverages as they watched the street traffic. And the guy watching me from the street below was just some staring guy.

So I didn't take my flute anymore. What was the point, when I was always interrupted, and the heat made me dizzy enough to see things that weren't there, and as for what was there...well, I spotted no Greek Ideal at Marathon or at Thermopylae, just ordinary tourists like us, wiping sweaty brows and talking longingly of television—something cold to drink—did you think they would have that roast rack of lamb again for supper?

So now he was here, on the cruise ship. *A* guy. Maybe even the same guy, but so what? He had to be a tourist just like us. The important thing, I told myself, was that the Greek male ideal, in his infinitude of form, would be looking for Alexa.

The door banged open. Alexa sighed, flinging herself on her bunk.

"It's hot! Come on, let's get dressed early, so we can grab a decent table by one of those window thingies. It's going to be boiling tonight, but that French guy said the band is so totally cool that everyone's going to be there."

"I'll just wear what I have on," I said.

Alexa sighed again. "Come on, Ari. Don't nerd out on me. I'll get you someone to dance with, I promise, but not if you go in there wearing an old

T-shirt and jeans. Where's that blue dress Mom got you? It looks good on you—makes you look longer. Thinner."

She really was sincere. I had to laugh. "Lexa, nothing makes me look longer and thinner. I'm short and square, just like one of those rocks you're sick of looking at."

"Mom says you're a throwback—you look just like those Byzantine people, and those girls on that old pottery in Athens. Maybe the guys here will think you're cute."

"I don't need guys to think I'm cute." But the words came out angry, because I was aware of my own hypocrisy. Not that I wanted guys' attention. It was anyone's attention—it was meaning, value to others—it was that applause, no, it was the joy I heard when I was ten and the audience was utterly silent except for the music of my flute.

No, it was how hard I worked to recapture that, and failed, whereas Alexa's beauty made her instantly valuable, though she didn't do anything but move through life looking beautiful.

Her voice changed to wheedling. "Come on, Ari. You'll have a good time. Great band, and there'll be lots of guys."

To cut off the sickening, *There might even be one for you*, I said, "Does it matter if I go? I thought I'd stay here and read some of this history that we've ignored, instead. We're here to learn about our history."

"Mom said I can't go alone, and I won't sit with the little kids," she retorted as she glanced in the mirror. As always, she was caught by her pleasing reflection. She smiled and fluffed out her short tangle of curls. "I want to get close to the band but near a window." She wrinkled her nose. "You can tootle your flute when we get home. It's not like you're going to be thrown out of orchestra if you didn't play on your vacation. And you can always tell your coach you played every day. Who's going to know?"

Who's going to care, that's what I heard in her tone, and I shrugged in answer and got up to go with her. When Mom saw the two of us together, she smiled and waved her newly manicured hands, releasing us to go where we wanted on the ship.

Alexa grinned and piloted me toward the *thudthudthud* of a band playing in a room that was already crowded, and super hot. The music was fast and loud, screechy instead of melodic. The beat tapped the inside of my ribcage, fighting against the rhythm of my own heartbeat, and the amplification assaulted my ears. I couldn't find a melody, but this kind of music didn't need a melody. It pulsed the hot summer air, resonating through our bodies, as people jerked and bobbed and twisted to that relentless tempo, watching each other for partners, and measuring their own appearance in others' eyes, while the old folks crowded near the bar waiting for drinks.

I sat at the table while Alexa waded into the crowd for cold drinks. She soon triumphantly reappeared, having been waved forward by some laughing guys, but no sooner did she sit down then one of the guys shoved his way after us and asked her to dance. His friend looked at me, then quickly away, as if he was seeking someone. I knew I'd been measured against the common standard, and rejected, and busied myself with the cola I didn't want, running my fingers up and down the frosty sides of the glass as I stared at the bubbles rising among the ice cubes, as if the meaning of my life fizzed and popped there.

I hated myself. I hated the heat. Above all I hated the noise, the crowd, the world.

I drank the cola so fast my nose hurt, then got up. Alexa would be fine—she was always going to be fine, I argued in my head with Mom. She would be fine through a long life of being beautiful and smiled at and chosen and waved to the front of lines.

Took me a couple of minutes to make it to the door, then I was out. The air was cooler by contrast, but so soft it felt like silk on my cheeks. The breeze smelled of salt and some kind of tangy flowers.

I moved along the rail, away from the noisy band and the glaring lights. My eyes soon adjusted enough for me to make out low clouds drifting overhead, forming mysterious shapes against the stars. Out over the water, wisps of fog glowed, ghostly silver against the blackness of an island.

I saw no lights on the island, just faint starlight etching the shape of rocky cliffs. Fog wreathed the shoreline, masking everything below the

hills.

A brief, cool sting of spray startled me. The breeze had kicked up.

Alone and unwatched, I gave in to impulse and pulled out my braid. Nobody could see me, and make comments about how my frizzy mat added pounds to my body—cool air fingered my scalp, and ruffled through the writhing locks drifting over my arms. I breathed deeply.

The scent of blossoms mixed enticingly with the salt of the seas.

I shut my eyes as I tried to identify that elusive fragrance, then became aware of a faint, far-off sound. Bells? Chimes? Too faint to make out, but sweet and clear-toned.

I leaned over the rail, wishing I could shut out the amplified *thump-thump* and screechy guitars behind me; I moved farther from the lit part of the ship, until I stood at the prow.

Voices! I stared out over the water as the melody rose, distinct enough for me to make out three voices, blending in minor keys, larking up the scale with tense chromatics and glorious chords. One of the voices commenced an eerie descant, the soaring notes forcing my gaze upward as if I'd find the singer a-wing. The back of my neck tingled when something flickered from one cloud to another. *Seabirds, of course, idiot*, I thought. *Looking for garbage tossed from the ship*. But the seabird that can maintain a descant in B minor has yet to be hatched.

Rubbing my eyes, I looked harder, wishing for light. A large bird drifted gracefully just over a distant fogbank, and the twinkling lights, the vapors glowing in the starlight, combined to form a woman's face.

"Ariadne," a sweet voice whispered.

No, it couldn't be calling my name.

"Ariadne," another called in a lovely fall of notes, from high overhead.

That's impossible.

"Ariadne," sang the third, from far across the water. "Come, come join us. Come sing with us."

How could women be singing out on the water somewhere, were they in a little boat? Was it music on a boombox?

Sirens, I thought, remembering one of the tour guide's lectures.

Only weren't they mermaids? And didn't they do terrible things to sailors?

I looked about quickly. No sailors in sight—no one but me, and a guy's slim silhouette leaning against the rail not far behind me.

"I can't sing," I whispered, feeling stupid for believing a thing that surely was a trick.

"We can give you beauty," came the high voice from above.

"We can teach you magic," sang the middle one.

"We can make you powerful," the low one intoned on a long, shivery note.

All three voices combined again, for a glorious chord: "Ariadne, come join us, and be beautiful."

"Be young."

"Beguile the world for ever and ever and ever."

I leaned out over the churning black sea. As the ship rose and fell on the surges, my body slipped, and I thought, who cares if I fall? But even so, my fingers gripped the tighter, my body wanting only to live, even if the mind inside it wavered between despair and the singers' complicated melody.

How to *capture* that music? How to put words to the emotions it conjured, so enticing and elusive, so enchanting?

"You will spin out your own spells," a woman sang sweetly just below the prow.

The first time I heard flute music, when I was five years old, it was like melted silver pouring through the air, like joy in sound, it was *beautiful*. I had tried ever since to recapture that beauty, breaking down music into logical pieces, but all that left me with was math.

I closed my eyes as I leaned out over the rail, not looking at the black water. *Will my music be beautiful?* I couldn't bear to say the words; all I could get out was the word "Beauty," almost drowned by the churning waves.

"Beauty, beauty, beauty," the voices echoed softly from sea to clouds. I leaned out farther, feeling salt-tanged splashes on my cheeks as I saw images of mysterious islands, marble temples, and of dark-eyed people with

garlands in their hair and graceful tunics, singing and dancing to the sound of lyre and aulos and panflute. In their midst I danced, flute lifted skyward as I spun out unending melodic lines, ensorcelling the entire world with beauty....

Spray as soft as feathers brushed my forehead and arms, and the voice whispered on a thrilling note, "You will steal all your sister's lovers, and laugh at her tears."

The next one sang sweetly, "You will make every other female wail in anguish."

And the third: "'Enthrall any man you desire," the high voice promised. "Men will cleave to you. Only you."

The beautiful images splintered, whipped away by the rising wind. I saw myself in the midst of a crowd of loud teenage guys I had nothing in common with, everyone vying for my attention.

And I laughed, holding onto the rail, my hair buffeting my face and arms in the rising wind. "I may not know anything else, but I know what beauty is. And that's not beauty."

The voices vanished. I opened my eyes, saw only the last of the clouds drifting away, and behind the ship the black line of an island disappearing over the horizon.

"Thalia summons her sisters," a voice spoke next to me.

I whipped around. There was the guy. Not *a* guy. It was the same one, tall and slender, though I can't tell you how I knew it. "Who's Thalia?" I asked. "And for that matter, who are you?"

"I am Glaucus," he said.

Okay. If he could role-play, then I could ask silly questions. "I thought the sirens scammed men with their voices. Or is it just sailors?"

"It's anyone who can hear them," he replied. "In the old days, women did not travel."

"Well, it didn't seem to work on you."

He shook his head. "They don't heed me. My labor is to gather the souls of those they drown, until the day Endymion awakens."

"Souls?" I repeated, not quite hiding my scorn.

He didn't even try to hide his. "So *you* know what is real and what is not, you who nearly flung herself into the sea?"

"But I didn't," I retorted, happy to be alive—and reckless because that music still lingered in my head with its enchanting melody. "So you would have just stood there and let me jump?"

He spread his hands, smiling mockingly. "But you didn't."

I had to laugh again. "It was the music, not drowning, that I wanted. They promised beauty. Until they got to that dumb stuff about taking my sister's boyfriends. I mean, I love my sister, and she is beautiful, even if she doesn't *see* beauty. Or hear it. Those stupid sirens, or whoever they were, don't seem to realize that there should be more beauty in the world, not less."

"But they are gone. You banished them with your laughter."

"Now what?" I breathed in, shivering in the cold air. Above, clouds tumbled, blotting out the stars. "And you'll be gone, too, because you're probably a figment of my imagination, and even if you weren't, people like me are never among the beautiful," I added bitterly. "And myths aren't any more real than souls."

Glaucus said softly, "When the wise don't see beauty, or hear beauty, or walk in beauty, they make it."

"They make it," I repeated, listening inside my head. Yes, the melody was still there. But fainter.

Glaucus lifted a hand. "Some of us dwell in smaller realms," he said. "But Thalia, Clio, and their sisters, they can be heard everywhere—by those who learn to listen for their voices."

Lightning flashed. An enormous volley of thunder made me clap my hands over my ears. When it was over a hand grasped my arm. "Glaucus?" I gasped.

Light swung before my eyes, almost blinding me, then it steadied: a flashlight, held by a sailor. "A storm is coming," he said, his accent heavy. "The sea is rising. You must go inside. Please."

The sailor guided me firmly toward the hatchway to the cabins.

Light and noise enfolded me again. People laughing, talking. Somewhere a radio blared, a dissonant counterpoint to the band still playing somewhere above me. Already the memory of my experience seemed unreal.

“It wasn’t a dream,” I muttered stubbornly as I let myself into our cabin. And despite my wet clothes and cold hands, I pulled down my flute.

Alexa came in. “Oh, Ari,” she exclaimed, throwing herself on her bunk. “You missed a dynamite party. Totally cool techno band, and the cutest guy from Germany....” She rolled over and frowned at me. “How come you just sit around like an old rock? You can tootle that thing when we get home.”

I looked down at the flute. “The Muses,” I said, not really aware I was speaking. That’s who Clio and Thalia were—they were the Muses of history and of comedy, two of nine sisters.”

“Music?” Alexa said, looking back over her shoulder at me as she fussed with her hair. “Is that what you said?”

“Close enough.” I grinned at her. “The lyre of Orpheus. According to the myths, it was good enough to make the Furies weep.”

“I’m going to weep if you start talking like those dumb guides,” Alexa retorted. “Now, what shall I wear tomorrow? I’m meeting that French guy at nine, and the German guy at lunch....”

She whirled out again, in search of more beautiful people. I grinned after her, beauty in form. Oh yes, I thought. Beauty, I recognize it when I see it. I recognize it when I hear it.

I put the flute to my lips, my practiced fingers unsure at first, then gaining speed as the melody spun out of memory into the air, shivering with enticement, danger and glory, sorrow and sweetness twining the glorious past to the ever-beckoning now. Faster and faster I played, dazzled with enchantment.

Was this the sirens’ song? Or from the Muses?

I guess I’ll find out when Endymion wakes. Because this is what I know: the world always needs more beauty.

In Another Part of the Forest...

Mending Souls, by Judith Tarr

Sister Anne, by Sylvia Kelso

Princess Dancer, by Sue Lange

Nimuë's Tale, by Madeleine E. Robins

Ricky Cowlicky, by Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

Little Red in the 'Hood, by Irene Radford

Mending Souls

Judith Tarr

Tim Ryan was a cobbler in the old country. That was in Ireland, in Kilkenny, where the cats are, and also where, they say, lived a famous witch.

This isn't about the witch, though Widow Kyteler makes a fine tale for a winter evening. No, this is about plain Tim Ryan the cobbler—not even a shoemaker, he didn't aspire to that dignity. He mended soles and put on new heels and took the occasional stitch in time; and being an honest man, if he couldn't mend it he wouldn't, nor charge for it. Which was most of why he was poor, and why his sons and two of his daughters had to go across the water when the Famine came, but this isn't about them, either.

Tim Ryan the cobbler was poor in goods but rich as a good Irish Catholic is, with eight babies in the cottage and a ninth on the way. His wife Mary, being Irish, wasn't what you'd call a long-suffering woman, but being Catholic she knew what her duty was, and if she muttered about Tim sparing the rod on Saturday nights, she was no more eager than he was to stop tempting God to make them another baby when the last one was ready to wean. So they had the six boys and the two girls, and Mary prayed for another girl to give her mother some peace of a morning, which the good Lord knew a pack of boys would never do.

Tim, being duty-bound to earn the children's bread, got his peace in his little cubby of a shop, over behind the cathedral that the bloody English took from the Irish. He didn't think much on that, except to admire the colored glass in the windows, what he could see from the outside, and to tell time by the bell in the round tower. He was as good a Catholic as any man in Ireland, went to church of a Christmas and an Easter and saw Mary off to mass every morning that she could, and made sure the young Ryans

went to Father McGowan and the nuns to be brought up in the right and proper faith.

All things considered, Tim Ryan was a contented man. He was poor but not, on this fine day in October, so poor that his children had to go hungry, and he had enough work in front of him to keep them in bread and to pay the landlord his rent, which was all a simple man could ask.

He hummed to himself as he set a new heel on a lady's dancing shoe, a brisk tune that made the hammer dance and the nails fall in without a slip or a tumble.

When the bell rang over the door, he looked up with a smile, still humming his tune and setting the heel. As bright as the sun was even so late in the day, and as dim as the shop could be even with the gaslight turned up high, he wasn't perturbed to see a vast cloaked shadow filling the door. It was a gentleman, he knew from the sound of the sole on the step, a sharp clean sound that no working man's brogue had ever made, and from the shape of the shadow against the light, cape and top hat and all.

The gentleman hesitated as they often did, blind in the dark of the shop. Tim finished putting on the heel, turned the shoe in his deft fingers just for the pleasure of handling fine silk and dainty workmanship, and set it carefully in the row of mended shoes. "And there," he said affably to the shadow of the gentleman, "goes Lady Ellen to her ball again on Viscount Roderick's arm. They'll wed within the year, or I don't know a lady's mind."

"And how would you know that?" asked the gentleman. His voice was deep and rather hoarse, but cultured enough. He had come inside the shop and no longer loomed so huge, though he was both tall and broad. His face was shadowed under the brim of his hat, which he could have had the courtesy to take off under a roof, but Tim was not the man to chide him for it.

"Ah, now," said Tim, as affable as ever, because he would keep a cheerful face no matter how it rained, "I think I know what a pretty lady's thinking when she hangs on a young man's arm and smiles. And he has land

in County Meath and she has land in County Kerry, but they both have lands in County Clare, which would be a fine thing joined together.”

“You know a great deal,” said the gentleman, coming closer, which was not so difficult in a shop as small as Tim’s.

Now Tim could see his face, and a hard strong face it was, and white as spume off Aran, which is whiter even than bone. “Do you know how to mend a sole?”

“And it’s a cobbler I am,” said Tim, “and you’re needing to ask me that?”

“No,” said the gentleman like the sound of dolmens shifting. “Do you know how to mend a sole?”

Now Tim was a simple man, but he had never been a stupid one, and he knew what it meant when a man with a face whiter than bone looked down at him with eyes that gleamed just faintly in the dimness, as an animal’s will. Not being stupid, he shivered, but being a man without overmuch on his conscience, he was no more afraid than he should be. So he turned the gentleman’s question around in his head, and heard it as the gentleman meant. “Do you know how to mend a soul?”

“That would be Father McGowan, I’m thinking,” said Tim, “or the English in the cathedral, if it’s the Protestants you’re wanting.”

“No,” said the gentleman, who seemed to be a man of few words, but those repeated at regular intervals, “there’s no priest can help the likes of me. I’ve need of a man who can mend my soul, not preach it into a stupor.”

Tim knew better than to smile at that, which was disrespectful in the extreme, although he was inclined to agree with the gentleman. “Sure and the priests will preach, but they have the care of souls. I’m but a mender of shoes.”

“Shoes and soles, men and souls,” the gentleman said. “What’s in the sound of a name that makes it strong enough to conjure with? I’ve need of a cobbler here, and you’re the best I’ve found.”

Tim crossed himself. The gentleman didn’t go up in a cloud of smoke, which was just a little disappointing.

“Well done,” the gentleman said, and there was no telling if he intended any irony, because the dark was coming fast in the way it has in Ireland at

the end of October. "Will you come tonight where our guide brings you?"

The words were a simple question, but Tim heard command not far beneath. It came to his mind that this was no night to be walking abroad: All Hallows' Eve as it surely was, when the dead walked, and the hills opened and strange things came forth to spy on the living.

Still and all, he thought, he was as good a Christian as a man could be, and the gentleman had not flinched even a little when Tim made the sign of the cross. And Tim, it must be said, had always been a little wild. Before Mary led him willing to the altar, he had slept all night on a haunted hill and come back neither a poet nor mad, which would have made a bitter man of one less equable than Tim.

Maybe that night had marked him after all. At the time it had been a disappointment: nothing but stars and moon to keep him company, and a shadow in the grass that turned out to be a fox. Finally he slept, and woke in the grey morning, unharmed and unchanged, and no more to show for it than a crick in his neck.

"Sure it's a strange thing you ask," he said when he had thought the gentleman's question through, or as much as he meant to. "Will you give your word that no harm will touch me?"

"None that you don't wish for yourself," the gentleman said. "My word on it." And he crossed himself as devoutly as any priest.

Tim eyed the gentleman narrowly. There was a twist in the tail of that, he was sure. But he was eager as a man will be who has been respectable for too long to be comfortable, and he was intensely curious. "So then," he said. "And will I be paid for this?"

"Certainly," said the gentleman. "And well, if gold is your pleasure; or if you have another desire...?"

"No," Tim said hastily. "Oh, no. Gold would be splendid indeed."

"Then gold it shall be, enough to fill your hands and pour right over, if you succeed. And if you fail..." Tim held his breath. "If you fail, a guinea for your trouble, and a half-crown now to seal the bargain."

Tim looked down at the coin that had appeared, it seemed, from air, to settle gently on the bench. He didn't pick it up, or insult the gentleman by

testing it for soundness. His heart beat hard at the promise of gold, but he wasn't a greedy man, no more than a father of nine had need to be. It wasn't the gold that lured him but the promise of something out of the ordinary.

"You'll send a guide," he said, "and I'll be waiting. It's midnight it will be, I suppose, and I should have my tools in my pocket?"

"Earlier than midnight," the gentleman said. "You have to come where you're needed, after all."

He held out his hand. Tim had half expected bare bones, but it was a man's right enough, and warm, not corpse-cold, though it was as white as the gentleman's face. He had passed a test of sorts, he thought as he clasped that strong white hand.

"Tonight," the gentleman said, bowing slightly; then he turned and left the shop.

o0o

Tim didn't tell Mary that he'd made a bargain with a dark man to go out on All Hallows' Eve. Mary would have put her foot down, he knew very well. He kept his tongue behind his teeth, and she didn't notice anything. The baby was fretful, and Mary was tired with the new one growing in her. They all went to bed as soon as their supper was over.

Tim lay wide awake but pretending to sleep. When the last restive child had gone blessedly quiet, he lay for a long count of heartbeats. No one woke, not even the baby.

He got up carefully and dressed in the light of the banked fire. The gentleman's half-crown was in his pocket still, cold to the touch and hard, like a promise made solid.

He put on his coat and his cap and took his brogues in his hand, and tiptoed for the door.

There he paused. They were all sound asleep: Mary in the bed with little Pegeen in her arms, Eileen curled like a kitten against them; the boys on their pallets, Young Tim and James and John, Paddy and Michael and Frank, not a sound out of them but the soft sea-swell of their breathing.

Softly then, with a last glance back, Tim slipped the latch.

The night was cold, edged with frost. Nothing stirred in it but a lone small shadow that came to wind meowing round Tim's legs. From the sound and heft of it, Tim knew Mary's ginger cat. He bent to stroke the beast, and it arched and purred against his hand. Tim found himself leaning forward, then stepping out, to keep from trampling the cat.

One step led to another. The cat wove and purred, then trotted ahead, then trotted back. His white bib was distinct in the starlight, the rest of him gone grey as all cats are at night.

"So then," said Tim. "Is it my guide you are and all?"

"Yow," said the cat, and purred.

And why not? thought Tim. What better guide on such a night than a cat? And king of cats at that, as Mary always said: he was that big and that strong, and that proud of all his battles. There were more ginger cats in Kilkenny these days than there used to be, and most of them with Tam's big coin-yellow eyes.

And so Tim had his guide, right down through Kilkenny town, then out where the houses were few and far apart, and the road wound up and down through hills dark in the starlight. No creature passed them, no man met them. All the wise and the foolish were safe abed, while the dead were not yet up and walking.

oOo

The cat led Tim down one road and up another, and then left into a lane, and at the end of the lane was a house. Dark as it was and looming against the stars, maybe it was no house at all but a hollow hill, and the door opening in it, casting light far into the night.

It was house enough inside, wide and high and old, such as the gentry lived in. And gentry in it, too, with a starched-stiff manservant to meet Tim at the door. Tim pulled off his hat and wished that he'd known where to find the servants' entrance, which this surely was not, but the manservant looked no more disapproving than menservants ever do. He greeted the cat with an inclination of the head, and Tim with one slightly less pronounced, and said, "This way, if you please."

Tim wouldn't have been surprised if the cat had left him to his fate, but the cat stayed, walking just ahead of him, its long tail up at its jauntiest angle. Tim took heart from that, and put on a bit of a jaunty air himself, walking lightly after the servant.

The house seemed ordinary enough, as far as Tim could tell; he hadn't spent overmuch time in the houses of gentry, and then mostly belowstairs. He was led down a passage and round a corner and into a room like a parlor, full of people dressed as gentry dressed. Tim in his well-worn laborer's clothes knew the moment of panic that every man knows when he should have worn his Sunday best, but he had no time to turn and run. The servant had announced the guests: "Tim Ryan the cobbler, and Red Tam of Kilkenny."

Tam the cat walked into the circle of eyes, strolled up to the fire that was burning bright and hot on the hearth, and stretched himself in front of it as if he were a king and the hearth his throne. Tim, who lacked the cat's aplomb, wavered in the doorway till one of the gentlemen separated himself from the rest and came to greet him.

They were all alarmingly alike, men and women both, with their white harsh faces and their narrow height and their bright, bright eyes. But Tim knew the one who had come to his shop; that one was taller than the rest, and broader, and he wore a leaf-green stone in his cravat. The other men had white stones or none, and the women's ornaments were all jet or ivory, set with stones like the moon. All the women were in white and all the men were in black, stark in the warmth of that room, with its fire and its rich hangings and its carpets like jewels poured out on the floor.

"Here," said Tim's gentleman when he had said the words of welcome, "by the fire. Will this do?"

There was a cobbler's bench, and as fine a one as Tim had seen, all shiny and new, with every tool a cobbler could dream of. His own honest tools looked worn and shabby beside them.

Still, thought Tim, they were his, and his hands knew the heft of them. He sat on the splendid new bench, found it not too ill for new, and he said so before he thought. He flushed and would have stammered an apology,

but the gentleman forestalled him. "Indeed it's new and lacks a craftsman's character, but you can bring that to it."

So Tim could, he supposed. He arranged his own tools among the strange ones and could think of nothing better to do than wait. The ladies and gentlemen had drawn into a circle about him and his bench and the fire with the cat in front of it, and their eyes made him shiver and look down at the worn and friendly handle of his favorite awl.

Someone was standing over him. He looked up. There was a lady, and she had something in her hand. "My soul," she said. "Can you mend it, good cobbler?"

Her face was white and sharp, but it had its own beauty. Her voice was sweet. In her hand was what looked for all-the-world like a lady's dancing slipper. It was a little thing, and to be sure the toe that peeped beneath her hem was not so large either; and its sole was worn as thin as a baby's cry.

Tim took it, because if he did not, she would have dropped it on the floor. It felt like a shoe, and one beautifully made, the way they made them for great ladies. He wondered if he was being made sport of, brought in to this rich house to mend shoes for some lordling's game.

But there was Red Tam by the fire purring, and the circle staring, and something in the thing that he held that was not quite all that it seemed to be.

He took a breath and let it go. There was leather on the bench, or what looked and felt and smelled like leather, and very fine, too; there were nails as good as any he had seen, and thread on spools for any stitching that he might need; and he had his own hammer and his awl and the rest of his tools in their places. He knew nothing of souls, but soles he knew, and this one he could mend.

o0o

One by one they came to him. Some brought dancing shoes, some boots such as the gentry rode to hunt in, and one even had a brogue no finer than Tim's own. That was a young gentleman as elegant as the rest, but he was

the only one who seemed to know what a smile was. While Tim mended his shoe he knelt to rub Tam's chin. The cat's purr swelled to thunder.

Abruptly it stopped. The young gentleman raised his head. By then, the others had drawn back to leave Tim in peace; those whose shoes were mended were talking softly, or had been till the cat stopped purring.

A new figure stood in the door. Tim heard the servant behind him, crying, "My lord! I could not keep him out."

"Surely," said the gentleman with the leaf-green stone, "and what man could?"

Tim's hammer paused. The cat hissed. So did the young gentleman: "Keep on. Don't stop."

Tim's hand moved of itself, set in another nail, hammered it home. His eyes were on the door.

This was a gentleman like the others, but where they were white, he was ruddily dark, and where they were tall and elegant, he was thickset and burly. But his eyes were as bright as theirs, with the same strange gleam, and its edge, Tim thought, was anger.

When he spoke, his voice was surprisingly soft, smooth like a priest's or a lawyer's, no roughness in it at all. "Ah, then, I feared I'd find you done and gone. Such a pity as that would have been, to come too late on this of all nights in the year."

No one moved, and no one spoke but the stranger. "Well, my friends. Will you not invite me in?"

"No," said someone in the circle.

But the leader of the circle sighed. "I fear we must," he said. "He has as much right to be here as any of us, and more maybe than some."

No one gainsaid that, though faces went harder even than nature had made them.

"Come in," said the gentleman with the leaf-green stone, "and be welcome."

"So shall I be," said the stranger, stepping into the room and the circle. Both seemed to shrink with his coming, to dwindle to tawdriness: colors faded in the carpets, threads worn bare, the white of the ladies' gowns gone

faintly yellow and the black of the gentleman's coats turned to rust. But the stranger seemed as vigorous as ever.

"And what have we here?" he asked, as if he had just now seen what Tim was doing. "A cobbler at the gathering? What new game is this?"

Tim kept on with his mending, though his hands were so cold and shaking that they could barely hold the hammer or the nail. He didn't know who this man was, no, not at all. He didn't want to know. He was mending shoes, no more, and if it was a game, then well for the players.

And now the stranger was standing over him, and his presence was hotter than the fire, yet cold, as cold as the breath of the dead. And indeed as Tim sat there, the clock on the mantel chimed the hour: twelve sweet awful notes, like keys in the lock of the Otherworld.

The stranger spoke in the silence that followed the chimes. "What are you doing?" he asked in the most ordinary and harmless of voices.

Tim had no choice but to answer. "Mending soles," he said. He held up the brogue that needed only its last few nails, good strong ones for a good strong shoe.

The stranger's face darkened with anger. "You are *what?*"

"He is a cobbler," said the gentleman with the leaf-green stone. "He entertains us with his craft."

"So?" The stranger stretched out a hand. Tim recoiled, taking the shoe with him. The stranger laughed. "Why, how dull! What happened to the dance you used to dance?"

"We'll dance when all our souls are mended," said the gentleman.

"And what need have you of that? Your souls are quite as sturdy as any. Sturdier, some might say, with the kind of dancing you do."

"Still," said the gentleman, "it wears them down in time. Not even the strongest can walk the roads we walk, or dance the dance at the end of it, without some price to be paid."

"Surely," the stranger said, "and that price I came to take. And here I find you in thrall to a common laborer, a mortal man as ever there was, and the stink of popery on him. Have we all sunk so low as that?"

“We do as needs we must,” said the gentleman. “Without us to dance down the year, who knows what would come out of the hills?”

“Why,” murmured the young gentleman, still on the floor with the silent, bristling cat, “what but you, old breaker of the dance?”

The stranger went as red as the fire that was sunk now to coals. “So, young breaker of faith, you forget what promises you made? You were born for the dance, but you were born as mortal men are, and like all mortal men, in your time you must die.”

“But not now,” the young gentleman said, rising in a fine flare of courage. “We found a way to make ourselves stronger, to give ourselves more years for the dance. We never promised not to do that.”

“Only, in your time, to give yourselves to the ones below the hills,” said the stranger. “That time was set before the earth was made. You cannot defer it by such shabby expedients as this.” He flung out his hand. Tim felt the buffet, though it came nowhere near him. It made him miss his stroke with the hammer and nigh crush his own thumb.

One more nail. One more and the shoe—“the soul”—was mended. It was the last. And Tom could not move, could not reach for the nail, could not drive it home.

“We were not all to be taken this night,” said the gentleman with the leaf-green stone. “Only the eldest of us, and the youngest were to be granted new partners in the dance. I bid you take us, then, fine new souls or no, and let our children be.”

“But you see,” the stranger said as if it were the most reasonable thing in the world, “you broke your faith; I’m no longer bound to keep mine. I’ll have you all, even the least of you, and swiftly, too.”

“We must dance the dance,” the gentleman said. “We must shut the doors of the hills. You cannot deny us that.”

“Oh,” said the stranger with a flash of teeth that had nothing human in them at all, “but I can.”

Tim was blind with terror, but somehow he found the nail at last, and firmed his grip on his hammer, and set nail to sole. He didn’t know why he

did it, or what use it would be. He had to finish it, that was all, as he always finished what he had begun.

Something warm pressed against his leg. Tam the cat looked at him with eyes like golden guineas. Tim cared not a whit for the gold that he was promised—and not likely he would get it, from all that he'd heard. But the cat's eyes had courage in them, enough to go on with at least. Tim drove the nail home.

And nothing happened. The stranger and the gentleman faced one another in simmering silence. The young gentleman looked ready to leap into the fray, if one ever began. The rest of the gentlemen and ladies seemed frozen in shock or bewitchment.

“Young sir,” Tim said. His voice wavered, but it was loud enough for that. “Your soul is mended.”

The young gentleman spun. The older one jumped like a deer. The stranger's face was as red as blood.

“Dance,” said Tim, and where the words were coming from, he never knew. “Dance for your souls' sake.”

One of the ladies began it: the one who had come first to have her soul mended, who seemed to be as brave in her own way as the young gentleman who leaped to take her hand. Then another lady stepped out, and another gentleman with her; and the next, and the next. Musicians there were none, but there was music, wailing of pipes and beating of drums that might have been Tim's own heart hammering under his breastbone.

And they danced. It was not the stately swirl of the cotillion, nor quite the lively measure that Tim knew best, but something betwixt and between. And in the middle stood the stranger, as if with his stillness he could drag all the rest to a halt.

Maybe he slowed them a fraction at first, but once they began, they took strength from their speed. Tim at his bench was dizzy, watching. He dared not get up or run. The night was outside, and the dark, and the armies of the dead. Not a few of whom, he suspected, served the stranger here. They would not spare the man who had made a mock of their master.

The cat sprang into his lap. Its purring calmed him somewhat. He stroked it as much to give his hands something to do as for any other reason, and watched the dance, and maybe he prayed a little, too, as time went on and on.

None of the dancers approached him, though once or twice a lady's skirt brushed past him, sweet with the scent of flowers.

They danced the night into dawn, each step a nail in the door of the Otherworld, each turn a turn of the key. And the stranger stood in their center, stiff as a pillar and as still.

Far away and faint, a cock crowed. The dance swirled to a halt. The last of the fire was gone. The light was grey, and there were no walls but air, no carpet but grass and the mold of years.

Tim blinked and gaped. He sat on a green lawn, and beyond him was a circle of trees, birch and beech, white and silver-grey, and in their center a standing stone. He clutched at the bench on which he sat. It was stone, and his tools were scattered on it, and the cat sitting in the midst of them, blinking at him with coin-gold eyes.

"And that's all the gold I'll be getting," he said wryly.

He was not about to call it all a dream. Oh, no, not Tim Ryan, who knew what was real when he saw it.

The cat yawned, curling a long pink tongue, and stretched. His claws caught in a shape of leather. Tim snatched it before it fell to the grass. It was part of the stock of leather that he had worked with in the night, and there were the nails, and in a bag near by them, such tools as cobblers dream of.

He laughed, there in the grey cold morning. "Not gold," he said, "after all, but means to make my own." He turned and swept a bow to the trees. Maybe they bowed back. Maybe it was only the wind coming up with the sun. "And a fair morning to you, and may God hold you in His hand."

They wouldn't take that amiss, he didn't think. He was whistling as he began the long walk home, even knowing what Mary would say when he came in as late and rakish as the cat. He would tell her everything, he knew that very well, and she might even believe him.

And maybe she did, and maybe she didn't, but in the end she let him be. He never did come into the gold that he'd hoped for. He did well enough while he could, and when the Famine came, the children left, all but Maeve, the last. She married a shoemaker in Dublin and had her own tribe of children, and one or two of them inherited their father's skill. And now and then, it's said in the family, one of them will go away for a night and come back whistling in the morning, with new tools in his bag—or her, the last generation or two—and a look of someone who carries a secret. But the rest know where he's been. He's been mending souls again, as his father did before him.

Sister Anne

Sylvia Kelso

— If you gaze long enough into the abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.

—*Nietzsche*

“‘Sister Anne, sister Anne, do you see anybody coming?’”

Once, the freshly leafed chestnuts would have allowed a child who clambered up on the drawing room window-seat to catch one glimpse of white road bending into the park gates. Now, though Alexandra laid down her quill when her brother spoke the old tale’s catch-phrase, she did not forsake her ledger to seek a plume of dust.

“Bertrand, Herr Dalsace can hardly have reached the village yet.”

“Oh, yes. But....” He tweaked his cravat.

“You had rather be in your laboratory.”

“Dear sister, one must certainly not be absent from one’s own marriage negotiations.” His rueful private smile dawned. “But you know how I abhor wasting time.”

Alexandra rose and came to stand by him at the empty fireplace. “I am persuaded,” she said, “that Melisse will not count it waste.”

“Do you think so, sister mine?”

He looked down at her with all amusement gone. He was quite handsome, she thought, with those slightly down-slanted, half-veiled, almost-smiling family eyes, his dark hair still nearly tidy, and the cravat not yet creased.

She laid a hand on the sleeve of his elegant new bottle-green coat. “Only be patient,” she said softly. “Let us try just once more.”

Melisse Dalsace certainly did not count his presence a waste. From the moment he came downstairs, past the portrait of his powdered, bewigged and ruffled great-grandfather, to make his bow before the Flemish tapestry—Paris with the apple of divine contention—and mimed kissing Melisse's hand beside the matching Chinoiserie urns, she could not tear her eyes from him.

Really, Alexandra thought, exchanging nothings with Herr and Frau Dalsace, the latter overpoweringly embroidered in cobalt satin, the former puffing with a mixture of awe and self-consequence, *need I continue here?* Herr Dalsace would remind her of his thriving canal boats; his wife would drop the name of remote noble connections; but dowry negotiations were already a formality. Melisse, gazing up breathlessly, billing and cooing single-handed, was bent on marrying Bertrand, the Count of Schloss Hohenstein, regardless of her seventeen years to his thirty-five, their disparate rank, his reputed wealth, his dubious reputation, or any other impediment.

oOo

The wedding was imposing, to no one's surprise. The ceremony proceeded in the Schloss chapel, after a procession of bridesmaid cousins in appliquéd sunrise-pink, threading a lower hall so crammed with bride-guests pricing each other's finery that the complete absence of Hohenstein connections passed without remark. The park road was hemmed thick with staring, waving, but distant and perforce, silent villagers. And Melisse, her radiance almost equal to the acres of ivory silk worked with palest pink rosebuds and a fortune of pearls about her neck, never took her eyes from the man at her side.

She came back from the honeymoon almost as bedazzled, out-babbling the park brook about Vienna fashions, the opera, the coffee houses, the hotel—"Right next to Vivaldi's house! Only think!" Somewhat to Alexandra's surprise, she did not babble about her wedding night; but the languishing glances she cast at her husband spoke for themselves.

Alexandra was entirely surprised at breakfast the next morning, after Bertrand drew the household chatelaine from his pocket, the Schloss keys jingling around its rim, and said, "My dear, we have a simple regime here: the laboratory is my own Schloss. Alexandra will continue to manage the estate. But this is your badge of office. You, now, will rule the house."

And when he held the keys out, smiling, Melisse accepted them without a single formal dissent at taking Alexandra's place, let alone a rhetorical question on her sister-in-law's feelings, or even, at this eccentric arrangement, an exclamation of surprise.

"With one proviso," Bertrand added gently. "In the laboratory, I require solitude. Alexandra will counsel you on matters that may need my advice. All else within-doors is at your command. But this, you must not ever use."

And he laid his finger, still smiling, on the small key with the crowing cock of the family crest enamelled in iridescent blues and greens above the wards.

o0o

"One of our grandfather's private rooms," Alexandra admitted, when Melisse descended on her study the instant the estate bailiff left. Give the girl credit, Alexandra conceded: she had held curiosity at bay an entire week. But now, she had doubtless toured the rest of the Schloss from cellars to chimneypots, her mother had interrogated the housekeeper, the footmen were found to be acceptably tall. Bertrand must continue to fulfill expectations, at least at night, since for the last three days he had been immured in the laboratory; but eventually, the last secret must have its turn.

"Your grandfather? Ooh." Melisse rounded her pale blue eyes and breathed, "The one upstairs?"

So the Dalsaces had heard the story, too. "The portrait in the gallery," Alexandra agreed, keeping her face smooth. "The one who invented a better power-loom." And thus re-made the family fortune after Napoleon fell, she did not add. "My brother still uses his laboratory."

"Ooh." The eyes went rounder. "Is that *safe*?"

“My dear sister.” Alexandra contrived to look indulgent. “Surely those old stories are beyond your credence? Secret rites? Chanting at midnight? Raising demons? To alter a *power-loom*?”

Their matched laughter tinkled; Melisse flipped the chatelaine jauntily. “No, no! Peasant tales—fit for scaring children! Only....” The enamelled key came upright, as if by chance, in her fingers. “The other room...?”

Alexandra raised her brows. “My dear, you will have to petition your husband over that. He is quite Gothic about it. He maintains—in this day and age!—that the contents of that room are unfit for young women’s eyes.”

Yes, she added silently. Look shocked, my little bourgeoisie. You even have my leave to blush, at showing your mealy-mouthed morals so. But if embarrassment at either gaffe keeps that room closed, I will give heaven thanks.

o0o

“Dear me! To what do I owe this honour, Bertrand?”

“Oh, ‘sister Anne’...!” Bertrand subsided into her study chair with a thump. His cravat was gone, his collar-points wilted and collar open; chemicals stained his fingers, and his hair stood inartistically on end. “That *woman*! At the door before seven this morning: ‘Bertrand darling, can I not peek at what you are doing? I’ll not utter a word, I vow.... Just a teensy-weensy glimpse? Surely, for just a moment? You never kissed me good morning.... I never see you at breakfast....’ The bottom lip wobbling and the lashes fluttering and her nightgown—her nightgown!—not a robe over it, and halfway down her décolletage! What will Emile think!”

“That you have made a perfect conquest,” Alexandra said when she stopped laughing. “Again.”

“If I were only sure of that—” He broke off short. “But it’s too much to endure, sister mine. I give her the nights already. I cannot be badgered daylong as well!”

“Bertrand.” Alexandra laid her hand over one of his. He stopped; looked half-shamefaced; covered her hand with his own, and said gruffly, “I know. ’Tis your concern, too.”

“She is young. She does try—”

“Indeed she tries!”

She patted his arm. “Emile will not leave you unassisted, after so long. And you may exert patience for yourself. Give me a day or so, to see what I may do.”

o0o

Melisse’s lip indubitably wobbled, and her lashes were dewed with tears. “From Mama,” she said, exhibiting the letter dolefully. “I sought her counsel as you urged, dear sister. And she writes me this!

‘My dearest daughter, have I not told you a score of times, a man’s business is no place for a wife? I would never expect your dear Papa to entertain me at the wharf-side, nor would I require details of his ladings, his crews—how much less should you? A noblewoman, mistress of the Schloss, and your husband a learned man—nay, a veritable alchemist! Melisse, I sincerely beseech you, remember your standing; your dignity. A Count may comport himself as he will. And whatever words a husband may vouchsafe of his affairs should be enough for any virtuous wife—let alone a lady such as you!’”

“Very plain-spoken,” Alexandra agreed, letting fall the tail of her riding habit and beginning to draw off her gloves. “Thank you, Jeanne, I will ring.” *And thank provident heaven,* she added silently, *that self-esteem kept the chit quiet until they were come upstairs, with only one servant in range.* “I beg your pardon, sister, for bringing down such a scold. I only hoped your Mama might have some helpful advice.”

Though I did not expect, she thought, controlling the twitch of her own lip, that my missive to Frau Dalsace, concerned at some apparent friction in the marriage and wondering if she could advise her daughter, would bring forth such excellent fruit. The poor woman is in a perfect lather lest her darling expose her origins and estrange her husband beyond recall.

“But it was not helpful.” Melisse’s lip wobbled worse than ever. “Now I must not even *ask!*”

“There is still the house, my dear. Frau Becker speaks most highly of your hand with preserves. The cherries are gone, but the plums and peaches are coming into season. I rely on you to make the most of the crop. Andreas swears it is the largest in years, and I am sure Frau Becker has told you, I am no hand with a recipe, least of all preserves!”

“Oh—preserves.” Melisse hunched a shoulder and twitched the sapphires that matched her latest muslin. Bertrand had unearthed the necklet from the strong-room: an appeasement after two consecutive absent nights. “I can make preserves in my sleep, sister. And manage the still room. And choose the menus, and we are already preparing for the harvest supper. What does all that matter? When I must suffer in silence while Bertrand vanishes into that place—every day! Without a word! Coming out too tired to speak! Too tired to—”

She broke off, and the lip wobble became a shelf-like pout.

“Well, if I am to be shut like a drudge in the housekeeper’s room, I must find amusement elsewhere.”

“My dear sister!” Alexandra tried to contain her alarm. “You might ride out with me?”

“To look at crops and discuss fences? No, I thank you!”

“Some new books from Vienna? An order of silks?”

“I have clothes enow for a season already. No, if I am to be denied my husband’s company,” a determined glitter dried the once-brimming eyes, “then I will have guests!”

o0o

“My dear Melisse.” Bertrand smiled across the breakfast table, while Alexandra thought yet again that the half-smile in those coffee-dark eyes never altered, any more than in his great-grandfather’s painted face.

“Naturally you must have diversion. I am desolate that presently, my experiments demand such—” A graceful gesture supplied, *such absolute monopoly of my time*. “Will you grant me one week, Liebchen? Then I thought we might divert ourselves together. A small trip, perhaps, to Vienna? To Wurzburg?”

“Oh!” The sullen pout vanished in a breath. “Oh, Bertrand, do you mean it? Could we go? Really? Could we even go to Mainz? My sister Maria writes of such porcelains there!”

“Mainz it shall be.” Still smiling, Bertrand bowed across the coffee-pot. “My treasure has only to command.”

o0o

Bertrand passed the glass under his nose and carefully inhaled. While the vintner watched tensely, he took a sip. Rolled it slowly round his mouth. Swallowed, quite as slowly. Finally raised the glass again and smiled.

“My felicitations, Karl. It should not disgrace us, perhaps...this time next year?”

The vintner’s sweeping moustache rose in a huge grin. Behind him the lantern-lit cellar resounded to his underlings’ cheers. Plates of salt bread and olive-oil danced on the two barrel tops, and Alexandra lifted her own glass to her brother as Melisse stepped past to the vintner’s welcoming bow.

Bertrand tipped his glass high and said into the wine, “Is she increasing, think you?”

“I hardly know.” Alexandra held her glass to the lantern glow, admiring the fitful crimson and deeper ruby as the wine rolled to and fro.

“Devil take it, ’tis four months now. What ails the girl? Must I consort with her by daylight too?”

“Bertrand, please....”

“Your pardon, sister mine.” He brushed her shoulder, a quick, tender touch. “I know this waiting is hard. For us both.” He mimed another sip and glanced past her. The murmur ached. “Ah, Gott, if we can only make it happen—this time....”

“Dear Bertrand!” Melisse gambolled up, flourishing her glass. “Karl says ’twill be perfect next year, but have we nothing to drink this year? Nothing fit for company? For a ball? For one teensy-weensy dinner party? Dear Bertrand, I will soon be so bored....”

“Bored, Liebchen?” Black in the lantern glow, Bertrand’s eyes still half-smiled. “A tragedy. If you can but grant me a week—a fortnight—”

“Oh, pish!” Daintily but audibly, Melisse stamped. “Need we travel again? Can we not entertain here, husband? Invite neighbours? Tenants? The von Pruisens over at Burgstadt?” Her pale eyes narrowed to a glint. “Or better, my family? I would wish to show Papa—and Gottfrei, and Philippe—over this wonderful house!”

“Liebchen—”

“Bertrand....”

The voice had dropped. The pout deepened ominously. A first glint dewed the darkened lashes, and Alexandra said hastily, “Let us discuss the question, Bertrand. Perhaps in the morning room?”

o0o

The storm was prolonged and implacable. In vain were Bertrand’s enticements of complete attention in six weeks, a month, a mere fortnight, in vain his protestations and near pleas. “Dearest one, this is a crucial point in my investigations! I cannot—I cannot—break off now!” In vain were Alexandra’s attempted mediations, her defences of science, her invocation of Mama’s warning, her soothings and palliatives. The storm had built for two long months. It would not be contained.

When Melisse reached the verge of pure hysteria, Alexandra seized her brother’s arm and hissed, “Go!”

He turned an equally distraught face. Then he clutched his hair and fled the morning room, and Alexandra went to her sister-in-law, half-prostrate on the sofa, soaked handkerchief fallen, sobs reaching a crescendo to the first drum of her heels, seized each plump sarcenet-clad arm and shook until Melisse’s head snapped, before she shouted, “Be quiet!”

Melisse stopped in pure shock and Alexandra lashed her next words as if they were a whip.

“Another such tantrum will see you divorced.”

Melisse choked on a gulp. Alexandra shook her again.

“Do you think he cannot set you aside? He has done it before.” Melisse’s reddened eyes bulged. “Oh yes. He will pack you off with some polite

phrases and a settlement. Your family? Bah! What can they do? You are the daughter of a middling-rich bourgeois. *He* is the Count of Hohenstein.

“Now,” she said, staring down into the flushed, crumpling face, making ice from her own contempt, “try to act the lady, for once. Compose yourself. Go to your room. Summon your maid. Have her set you to rights. Then find your husband, and *listen* to what he offers. And this time, accept it. Graciously.”

Melisse gawped up, mouth at half-cock; perhaps, Alexandra thought dispassionately, more appalled at her sister-in-law’s transformation than at the actual threats. Then she blundered up from the sofa and fled.

o0o

“Dear sister, I swear, ’tis you are the ‘alchemist’.” Bertrand’s private smile was less rueful than awed. “Even warning me, ahead of time. She all but crawled to the laboratory door. She did not merely sue for terms, she tried not to weep on my coat—a miracle, in very truth!”

“A miracle.” Alexandra tried to bury her own feelings of guilt. “So, the terms of peace?”

He ruffled his hair up and sighed. “Ah, well, so far as the less...intimate: I have won an interregnum. She is absolved of this...lapse. And I have been merciful, as you warned. The family are coming, plague on them. But not ’til November. On that, I was adamant.”

Alexandra’s relief widened to a laugh. “November? The shooting? Oh, witty, Bertrand.”

The smile became a twisted grin. “I will have some respite from that oaf Gottfrei, if it costs me Andreas’s respect and every pheasant in the Hohenstein woods to manage it.”

Alexandra smiled with him, but then the smile died. She looked along the straw-coloured satin of the sofa, still spotted by Melisse’s tears, up to the rose and blue ceiling medallions where shepherds languished for porcelain-perfect nymphs. Then she said to the tall candlesticks on the occasional table, “Do you think—will it be long enough?”

His own levity vanished. He drew a hand wearily through his hair again and answered under his breath, "I do not know, sister mine. I will try with all my heart and mind, I swear it. But...I do not know."

o0o

By the first week in November, the thinning chestnut leaves hardly obscured the stretch of road between the park gates and the first village houses. The leaden sky would have shown dust nicely, but there was no need to watch for a plume of dust against that ample length of mud.

"Here they come."

Alexandra rose from her ledger. Melisse sprang from the drawing room sofa but checked with a jerk and drew her Paisley shawl closer round her elbows, one nervous eye on her sister-in-law. Before the window, Bertrand eased a finger inside his cravat and drew a long preparatory breath.

Melisse seemed to recover her spirit, or perhaps her courage, from the instant Gottfrei's broad red face loomed in the carriage door. At his bellow of, "Mein kleines Kätzchen! At last!" She squeaked like a genuine kitten even before he leapt down to envelop her in his arms.

Footmen hurried belatedly with the carriage steps; Bertrand was helping Frau Dalsace from the spattered coach. His polite platitudes vanished in Gottfrei's ensuing aside, as Melisse emerged from a billow of peacock-green waistcoat. "And not before time!"

Bertrand's shoulder twitched. Alexandra kept her face still. Gottfrei's advance did falter at the glacial facsimile of their grandfather's unamused stare, but he bore up strongly, half-nodding to Bertrand's over-perfect bow. "Ah, Count, we meet again—happy to be here. Yes, indeed!"

Making for the woods the next morning, gaitered and buff-coated, his father's silver-chased shotgun under an arm, Bertrand lifted his eyes in martyrdom and then rolled them at his sister, muttering through his teeth, "It does get him out of the house."

o0o

After a preliminary stiffness from Herr Dalsace, all the men appeared very much at their ease, while Melisse flittered and tittered almost in her pre-wedding style. The first evening, Frau Dalsace contrived to hide all but a hint of constraint; but next morning the women had hardly installed themselves in the drawing room, when she exclaimed, “Oh, my dear! I have forgot that pattern for my Berlin-work, and I particularly wanted to show Lady Alexandra. Could you run upstairs a moment? You know Agatha can never find such things....”

Melisse flitted blithely away, and Frau Dalsace came to admire the firescreen by Alexandra’s chair. “An heirloom,” Alexandra agreed. “I believe we have to thank a great-aunt in Napoleon’s time.”

Frau Dalsace gave the embroidered clematis garlands a perfunctory glance. “My lady,” she said, quick and soft, “I have not liked to ask Melisse herself. But can you tell me—have you any knowledge—how things may be with her?”

Alexandra did not pretend to misunderstand. She did drop her eyes to her lap as she murmured, “My dear mama-in-law...I fear, we must all wait a little more.”

Frau Dalsace glanced up sharply and, catching the motion, Alexandra looked up, too. “It is not,” she said, “for lack of attention. You may believe that.”

Frau Dalsace smoothed her hand abruptly over the carved lily mantel-end. “I am sure that a sister....”

“In this case, yes, a sister may be sure. Only one thing can divert my brother’s attention from his wife, and that, alas, has been his work. A project he cannot afford to neglect.”

Frau Dalsace looked up at the heavy, dark rose window drapes. And down. And up again. “It could not be,” she spoke each word as if stepping on eggshells, “that....”

Alexandra felt her teeth set; she made her voice regretfully sweet. “Perhaps you did not hear, in Miltenberg. My brother’s first wife. So terrible; she died from a miscarriage. The physician judged it was her seventh month.”

Frau Dalsace's clamped hands released. She looked into the fire and bit her lip. "I had so hoped," she whispered. "It has been near six months."

Alexandra averted her own face and pleated a fold in her ivory camlet skirt. "Believe me, madame," she murmured, "you could not wish that consummation more devoutly than we."

o0o

As the visit crept by, Alexandra hoped as devoutly that no-one else noticed the increased effort in Bertrand's courtesy or the strain emerging in his half-smile, let alone the shadows under his eyes. Struggling to cram a day's work in the few hours before the guests rose, wasting the rest of the day, as he would think it, on top of the labour of their company, crowned by Gottfrei's bonhomie...*Dear heaven*, she thought, watching him over the baroque epergne's silver bowl at the heart of the dining table, *only two more days. Let him remember that. Let him suffer in patience. Let him not turn on this oaf. Only two more days.*

That night, it began to rain.

"They will have to stay in the house." Bertrand just managed not to rip his collar open. "Plague on this weather! Plague on Andreas, for letting the foot-bridge fall apart!" He glowered out through the streaming panes of the breakfast room window, across the sodden court, over naked boughs tossed on a streaming sky. "Plague on this plague of family, most of all!"

But when the Dalsaces trickled in, he was at least a simulacrum of the affable, imperturbable Count. "My apologies, meine Herren. I know a little weather would not deter you from the butts, but alas! The wood-brook has broke its bank, and the bridge is unsafe. At a pinch, someone might wade across. But I would not care to so hazard any guest from this house."

Melisse pouted and fluttered, but the offer of periodicals in the library appeased Herr Dalsace; his sons succumbed to the lure of a billiard game, and Bertrand ushered them out, assurances of the table's quality fading down the corridor. Alexandra looked from Melisse to Frau Dalsace, smothered a sigh for her neglected ledgers, and suggested with her own version of noble affability, "Perhaps, we could consider a farewell dinner.

We mean to send you off in style. And maybe, the men could be persuaded to attempt charades?”

o0o

They were in the throes of planning a tableau for Cleopatra, flanked by both Caesar and Anthony, Melisse frothing with laughter, even Frau Dalsace animated enough to consider an expedition to the attic—”Brocades and velvets, I promise you, from the very middle of last century, madame!” when the drawing room door swung wide.

“So here you all are!” Gottfrei and Philippe trooped in, Gottfrei booming in front. “Enough of tapping balls around.” He, Alexandra translated, had lost. “And I’ve no taste for books. The grounds, the woods, the stables, been there, seen it all. But one thing we have never done. Come, meine kleines Kätzchen! Show us over the house!”

Alexandra’s words dried in her throat. Frau Dalsace could not be warned; in any case, she would cede to any project that brought her sons’ company. Herr Dalsace was immured or asleep—and where in heaven’s name had Bertrand gone? How could he have let them escape chaperonage, how was she to head them off? *Oh, heaven*, she thought, catching the glint in Melisse’s eye. *She’s going to seize the chance, the little idiot. There’s no hope of diverting her. She will take them straight there!*

The upstairs maid was in the passage as they trooped out. Alexandra seized an arm and hissed in her startled face, “Fetch the Count! Tell him, *Upstairs—the locked room! Now!*”

Three flights of central staircase the party circled up, Alexandra attempting diversions, Melisse insisting gaily that, “We must begin at the beginning! At the top!” Gallery and ballroom passed in a frame of sheeny banister, portraits half-glimpsed down the long perspective on the left, vistas of polished floor gleaming through a single open door to the right, light falling bleakly through the huge rose windows that had been the Schloss builder’s pride. “And here we are! The tower floor—the very top. You can look straight over to the coat of arms!”

And clear out over home woods and vineyard to the village, with no obscuring chestnuts, Alexandra sought breath to interject. But her attempt to point the party toward the left-hand door, which led to the innocuous and elegantly appointed eyrie of the Schloss builder, was in vain. Melisse was headed, irresistible as a beribboned and chattering landslide, for the door to the right.

“This is the special room. Young women are forbade to enter here.” A tinkling laugh. “But I’m sure, with Mama and you two great men to protect me—”

“No.”

Bertrand must have run even faster than the maid. He had used the servants’ stair that opened at the landing’s rear, and the instants while Alexandra swung the party’s attention to the left had got him from stair to door, clothes straight, chest hardly heaving, nothing in that black stare but ice.

“Oh!” Melisse gave a genuine scream. “Oh, Bertrand—”

She shrank toward Gottfrei’s arm. Frau Dalsace had come near a squeak herself. In the face of that look, even Gottfrei checked.

“Well, how now, Count, what is this? D’you say our sister has no rights here—is she not Countess of Hohenstein?”

“She is also my wife. I expect a wife to heed a husband’s orders. Especially in his own house.”

Gottfrei’s lips framed a silent O. Alexandra stifled her glee. The precedence of men, the sanctity of female obedience, in marriage or out. Hoist on your own respectability, my fine bourgeois!

“Er, well, well—”

“You may be interested, perhaps, in the Sieur Hohenstein’s private apartment. And the Schloss building plans?”

Bertrand gestured to the further door. Philippe, looking thoroughly embarrassed, was poised to withdraw. Doused by that icy hauteur, Frau Dalsace would have preceded him. Gottfrei wavered; but Melisse gave one shaken gasp and plucked at his elbow, and he stiffened his back.

“Well, well, m’sister says ’tis forbidden to women? But we’re no women, eh, Philippe? What’s to prevent you showing this precious room to us?”

Alexandra’s glee shrivelled. Gottfrei was blustering about, “Our sister, even if she is married. Something here to harm her, it’s our place to be sure....”

He has heard the stories, yes, Alexandra thought, heart quailing. In a moment he will bring them up.

Bertrand tilted his chin. He might have worn a wig and ruffles. He might have been armed *cap à pie*, sword in hand, standing with his great-great-grandfather, on some contested field against the Turk.

“I wonder,” he said very softly, “if I came into your father’s house and looked to view its private apartments—perhaps its very private apartments—as if I were a dunning bailiff? What would you say?”

Dull red flooded Gottfrei’s cheek. He held his ground at the stair head, but Philippe had plucked decidedly at his sleeve, and Frau Dalsace was on the topmost step. Melisse had shrunk like the pattern of an abducted maiden, languishing in the shelter of her champion’s arm. But now two hectic spots reddened her cheeks.

“Oh, a very private apartment!” she shrilled. “But I warrant *she* has seen it!” She flapped a furious hand toward Alexandra. “‘Tis only *I* am forbid—shut out—and *I* am your wife!”

A white rim marked Bertrand’s nostrils. His face did not change, but the words came softly, precisely, chipped from the ice of his eyes.

“Indeed, the women of the Schloss may enter this room—including the Counts’ wives. *After* they have born their first living child.”

o0o

“It was brutal, it was cruel, yes. Dear sister, was there another choice?” Bertrand rubbed the heel of a palm over his forehead. “I had emptied my armoury. If she once came to personalities, where would she have stopped?” His teeth gritted. “And I will not have her lay that prattler’s tongue to you.”

“Oh, Bertrand.” *I sound like that fool of a girl*, Alexandra thought, feeling as exhausted as he looked.

“*Damn* the chit,” he said under his breath. “Can she find no other string to harp? I left them for only ten minutes. There was a solution I began yesterday; I needed only to check...And *he* must blunder off to the drawing room, and *she*....”

Alexandra looked out from her study into the grey but rainless dusk. “At least,” she said, with a flicker of over-wrought laughter, “it laid her on her bed for the rest of the day. And kept her mother feeding her tisanes. And sent those two—where did it send those two?”

“The gun room, I believe. So Meinhof says. That I should be reduced to asking my butler the whereabouts of a guest...But had I been once—just once more, this day, in that oaf’s presence, I had called him out.”

Alexandra sucked in her breath. He sank down in the visitor’s chair and rubbed both temples this time.

“No. I would have kept myself, I think, from that. For your sake, sister Anne, if nothing else.”

Alexandra bent her head over the ledgers, open under her lamp. “I wish,” she said, almost inaudibly, “it had not to be done. It was not....”

“Not a fair fight. No. She has not the wit—or the armour—of a kitten. I would let her be, gladly. If she did not forever thwart me over this!”

Alexandra reached out for his hand. He met it eagerly and they sat, hand-fast, watching the light fade and a cold blue pallor touch the horizon rim. At last, Bertrand stirred and sighed.

“Let us count our blessings, then. The weather means to clear. The oaf survives. The parents are so mortified that given half a chance they will depart tomorrow, will-we, nill-we. I have the—pre-eminence of a husband—to cover my brutality.” He met her eyes, and grinned humourlessly. “We need only suffer through dinner and find some graceful way to accept their plans. And if I can keep my tongue from the oaf...” He scrubbed his forehead again. “Then perhaps I may hope to salvage something tonight.”

“No, Bertrand.” Alexandra sat up. “Please. I know you are past weary, I know she will be...difficult. But she has been—wounded—enough. I ask

you, for all our sakes. Do not abandon her tonight.”

Their eyes met and locked. Then Bertrand grimaced.

“She is young, she is unschooled; she has been spoilt. Yes. But I very much fear, sister mine, that she is also like some drunkards. Those that beat wives in their cups and then, sober, sue with pleas and tears for forgiveness. And swear ’twill never be repeated. And mean it. ’Til the fit takes them again.”

The room was darkening fast. Alexandra stared at him through the dusk.

“Bertrand,” she answered at length, “if you cannot bring yourself to mend—what has been broken—tonight...Do you think, can it ever be mended at all?”

At last he bent his head and rubbed the back of her hand briefly over his own eyes.

“Ah, dear heaven. Well, I doubt not I can do it. After her mother’s attentions, she will be past penitent. Though I will feel the veriest hypocrite...But as always, sister mine, you are right. As ’tis, she is trial enough. ’Twould be a hell on earth to live with her estranged.”

oOo

Hearing the hall clock chime midnight, Alexandra tried not to think about the cost of that mending. But when he and Melisse came down next morning, though both were pale and she still distinctly red-eyed, their silence spoke less of ongoing frost than of the spent quiet of wrongs and woundings newly reconciled.

So breakfast, she judged, was less fraught than the previous night’s dinner, even though, for that meal, Melisse had exercised a woman’s strategic right and had a tray sent upstairs. If no fugitive morning sunshine touched the windows, the sky at least remained dry. And in a barely courteous time after breakfast, the coach had been summoned, and baggage was being brought down.

Almost at once a clatter of hooves brought Meinhof in full state to open the front doors. Footmen sprang to portmanteaux and trunks, the servants’ carriage was laden, and maids and valets packed aboard. Melisse and

Alexandra flanked Bertrand as the party assembled in the *porte cochère* for the formal farewell.

They managed it, Alexandra decided, quite suitably. Herr and Frau Dalsace put a fair face on their embarrassment. Philippe murmured polite nothings, and for her and Bertrand both he and Gottfrei achieved creditable bows.

As Melisse and her mother hugged, Bertrand came very quietly to Gottfrei's side and said, almost under his breath, "Herr Dalsace, I honour your concern for your sister. It is only natural. But as her husband, it is also natural I should now consider it my place to protect and preserve her. On my word of honour, if she should come to harm, it will not be through me."

For a moment they faced each other, and Alexandra held her breath. Then Gottfrei bowed, awkwardly but stiffly, with no change of expression, and with the tiniest of shrugs Bertrand turned away.

Gottfrei and Philippe embraced Melisse, too. Unlike Frau Dalsace, Gottfrei added no monitory mutters; but he did breathe something in Melisse's ear at the last. Alexandra saw her flush and flick a glance up at him, before he relinquished her hand and preceded Philippe into the coach.

The steps were cleared. The coachman looked to Bertrand and, at his nod, gave his team the office. The coach creaked forward, passengers waving, and Bertrand and Alexandra waved back, calling the most affable farewells they could achieve.

"So," Bertrand remarked, managing a tone of at least polite regret. "Now, we should go in. I fear it comes on for rain. Liebchen, do you mean...." He half-turned assiduously to his right and stopped with a jerk.

Melisse was no longer there.

For twenty seconds Bertrand stood thunderstruck. Then he and Alexandra made the deduction together: Melisse's docility, the chatelaine hanging once more at her belt. Gottfrei's final aside.

"Oh, Gott im Himmel!" As one they spun and fled for the door and the stair beyond.

With a man's lungs and no hampering skirt, Bertrand reached the high landing half a stair flight in advance of Alexandra. Gasping onto the last step, she fell across the boards to the right-hand door.

Bertrand had flung the double leaves wide. Alexandra rushed between them into the jungle of light.

A jungle she had called it from the day she saw it, at twelve years old: the high domed ceiling pooled with mirrors, fronded over with gilded stucco tendrils, huge gold faux-curtain swags spilling down onto the walls, the overload of enamelled, iridescent cocks and hares and palm trees and Ethiopians that flourished in each corner, above wall-mirrors that flared back into each other images of portrait medallions and cavorting figures and the entanglements of stucco liana that overgrew every moss-dark surface; a lattice, an abattis, a jungle of ricocheting light.

And the master ceiling mirror that looked down from above the fireplace, reflecting back the two glass-topped, curlicue-legged tables beneath, pinning anyone who walked between them at the fulcrum of all the reflections, blazing into their eyes the overlaid and inter-tangled images of the viewer's face.

Alexandra heard Bertrand's strangled cry as she gasped across the half-mile of parquet floor to where he was already on his knees. But they were both too late.

Melisse had fallen backward before the black-steel maw of the fireplace, eyes still pinioned upward in the mirror's vice, hands clawing her throat. But even as Bertrand stooped, the hands fell away. The face crumpled like a card figure's; the eyes vanished too fast to reveal the skull; the body collapsed. All that remained, sprawled over the glistening parquet, was a tangle of garments: pale leather shoes, stockings, doubtless pantaloons, petticoats, chemise and shift, beneath the subsiding folds of blue muslin dress.

And the Schloss chatelaine, fallen atop it all amid the dust of a vanishing hand, with a musical, muffled clink.

After an eternity Bertrand got, laboriously as a man of eighty, to his feet. Slower than an automaton put in motion, he laid both hands over his face.

Alexandra stood beside him, so their shoulders touched. The room filled, softly as with dust's encroachment, with the sough of their human breath. A creak or two came from the parquet. A rumour of wind, distant and fainter than the remote ocean, touched the wide, uncurtained window panes.

Bertrand whispered, "If I had only come a minute—two minutes—before."

Alexandra breathed, "She had already looked."

"I might have stopped—caught her. Told her—not to believe...."

Alexandra said, "Even were she increasing, were she sure of it—she was still a bourgeoisie: foolish, frivolous, unfitted here. To see all that...."

Bertrand went on, as if he had not heard, "If I had noticed, downstairs. Only felt—when she let go my arm."

Alexandra let silence speak the futility of might-have-beens.

Bertrand took his hands down. Slowly, his eyes filled, and overbrimmed with tears.

"Poor kitten," he said huskily. "Poor, ignorant—headstrong—witless—oh, heavens! If she had only listened. Only waited—curse the succession, *that* could have waited—if she had only given me another week, another day—"

Suddenly his face contorted and he screamed up into the mirror's stare.

"Oh, blast you to hell eternal, you damned old fool! You and your cretin creation and your verdammt obsession with your precious blood-line and your, your dungpile of a House!"

Echoes bounced from floor to ceiling and slowly, indifferently died. Bertrand hid his face back in his hands.

"We could destroy it," Alexandra said, swallowing dryly. As she had said so many times before.

Bertrand's shoulders hunched. "Sister mine, you know we cannot."

"There is no proof that our father—"

"Do you imagine he flew through that window of his own choice? And he not thirty-two years old?"

When Alexandra did not speak, he lifted his head. “Do you counsel another trial? What will you use? Acid? Blasting powder? And who will you set to attempt it? Another innocent?”

She opened her lips and shut them. He half-turned to face her, his eyes bitter as acid. “Or should it be I? What happens, if I fail?”

Her eyes answered: If you fail, there is no one knowledgeable enough, skilled enough, proof enough by blood, to make any more attempts. At destruction, or anything else.

“Ah, lieber Gott.” He dropped his head on a long shuddering sigh. “*Curse* the old fool. I know the elements he used: the glass, the mercury, the salts. I have the frames, the forms, the moulds. I have the misbegotten *incantation*, save us all. I have the theory of the anti-form. In another month—another week—I must have found the correct proportions. I could have set the moulds. Melted the elements. Emile and I could have fitted the cast. Masked the thing forever—oh, could she not have waited one—more—day?”

Alexandra’s eyes filled, but she did not reach out to him. Instead she said, as she had so often before, “We could leave.”

“Leaving this pit behind us? In some other innocent’s path?”

When she did not reply, he said even more softly, “I do not doubt it would survive even the ruin of the house. And who might find it then? A thief? A gypsy? Some vagabond sheltering from the rain?”

Alexandra turned her head and looked out the great window, to the pediment statues that supported the Hohenstein coat of arms.

“We could,” it was just audible, “destroy the Schloss.”

Bertrand laughed. It teetered at the end like a broken bridge. “Sister mine, do you think we *can*?”

He waved a hand before she could reply. “I swear, our grandfather tried. The storm that broke the laboratory roof left notebooks still legible. And what would he want, making a power-loom, with saltpetre and sulphur and a map of the cellar floor?”

The wind sighed across glass and stone and slowly, slowly died.

“No,” he said, when she did not answer. “If we are not to—abandon all hope—any last shred of decency—there is only one choice. If I cannot beget an heir, to give us more time, to work after me, then I will have to stay here. I must find the anti-form myself. Or die trying.”

Alexandra opened her lips and shut them again. Bertrand studied her a moment. Then he said, very softly, “But you could go.”

“I?”

“Move. Go to Tante Elise. Enter society—in Vienna, in Cologne, what matter where? You are still no antidote, sister mine. You have rank. Fortune. Somewhere, there will be a personable young man.”

Before Alexandra’s memory ran a passage in the drawing room: Gottfrei blaring over the tea urn, “And you, m’lady? Never thought to marry, eh?” And Philippe, accepting a cup, murmuring as he moved off, “A pity, that.”

She had been so startled, she had looked over her shoulder and blurted, “Did you think to enter the lists?” And he had laughed, open amusement in those suddenly angelic blue eyes.

“Why no, Lady Alexandra,” he had answered, blandly, “I at least know my place.”

She looked back into the present, and answered coolly, “I could.”

The wind murmured again.

“But you will not.”

She did not say: What will you do, here alone? Will you decay into a countryside spectacle, a figure of mockery, eventually into the scope of peril, as rumour and stupidity paint you a sorcerer, a warlock, that it is the duty of a mob to destroy?

Even were you not my brother, did I not love you, and could bear to leave you so—if I wed, if I could wed, if I had children, what would your reputation do to us?

Aloud she said, quietly, evenly, “You could hardly invite a girl to visit, with or without her family, or enter into marriage negotiations, were you here alone.”

The wind sighed. The parquet creaked. They stood together, listening to each other breathe.

Then Bertrand drew both hands over his face and shuddered from head to toe. Before he pulled his head up and met her eyes, as he might have met those of a charging Turk, over spear or sword and shield.

And after a moment, he said, keeping his voice very steady, “Do you think...the chest is still safe?”

Oh, my brother, Alexandra wept silently. Oh, my dear one, my kinsman, my fellow prisoner, do you think I, too, cannot hear the lock turn in the dungeon door?

Aloud she said, “We have not used it since—Berthe. That is, what? Almost, five years.”

“Old clothes.” Bertrand drew a breath. “In an attic. Old clothes and dust....” His eyes flickered with a vicious mirth. “Is there room?”

Alexandra grasped her arms tightly against herself. “Beside great-grandmère’s castoffs—there are only Berthe’s clothes. And the....” She stopped short. “And Adelaide’s. And,” it faded almost away, “Rosaline’s.”

Bertrand shut his eyes a moment. Then he looked down, at last, to the clothes before his feet.

To the floor he said, “They took all their own servants.”

“Meinhof—the maids—the footmen—Emile—no-one here would ever talk.”

Bertrand’s lip curled. “Heavens, no. Chouse themselves out of such a fine place as this? Give or take a little sorcery; some accidents; an untoward death or two?”

Alexandra shrugged.

When Bertrand looked back at her, there was a question in his gaze.

Alexandra looked up. Her voice sounded steely as her great-grandfather’s own.

“She fell,” she said, “on the stair.”

Bertrand’s lips opened on a gasp. And shut.

“She took fright,” Alexandra said evenly, “and ran. From something in this room.”

Bertrand gasped in earnest. Then he let out a laugh that choked.

“A convenient economy, yes? A fine use of truth. And the oaf will never let the family question it. A just revenge on him. I swear, ’twas he who teased or drove her to it. Those last words....”

Alexandra shut her eyes. In a moment, Bertrand’s own eyes filled again with tears.

“The big Wedgewood urn. At the half-landing...she knocked it with her.” He squeezed his knuckles for a moment against his mouth. “We could not bear to have the coffin open. To let her kin see the—the—Oh, *curse* the old fool! Did he ever imagine there might *be* no other Hohensteins?”

Alexandra thought of the funeral, of Frau Dalsace’s grief, and physically jerked back her head.

Bertrand turned and walked away. To the great window, with its prospect of courtyard and woods and vineyard and village, and the distant hills, and the road leading toward them, out of sight. Presently, he leant his head against the panes.

Alexandra came soundlessly behind him. This time she touched him, laying a hand on the back of his coat.

“And then,” he said, as if his lips were numb. “If I cannot solve it by then...A year...two years...for the Count to mourn another wife. And then....”

Alexandra laid her head against him as well.

“Du lieber Gott,” Bertrand said, sounding half exhausted, half weary beyond hope, “do you suppose, if our thrice-damned ancestor has built a foolproof devil’s device to rid his House of interlopers, never dreaming his heirs might have to marry one—do you suppose, that somewhere, anywhere, in the breadth of Bavaria, Prussia, the Austrian empire—there exists a girl who is *not* a Hohenstein, but who has the soul to look in that mirror, and see the truth of herself—and not turn to dust at the sight?”

Alexandra neither moved nor replied. She merely pressed her forehead against his coat.

Bertrand lifted his own head and stared out over the road’s serpentine length of mud.

“Sister Anne, sister Anne, do you see anybody coming?” he said.

Princess Dancer

Sue Lange

The *Princess Dancer Lounge* reigns over a parking lot two miles out of Centreville just off old Rte 121. It is a kingdom of potholes, sparse gravel, and pigweed. Two trees-of-heaven fight the chain link fence on the far side. The trees are gnarled and intertwined with the mesh. An empty dog kennel sits between the two.

The club is a single story building of yellow-painted cinderblock with blacked-out windows. A shocking fuchsia sign atop the roof and facing the highway features part of a woman's face: a nose, a brow, a row of lashes with no pupil. Apparently, the dancer has no soul.

There were eleven of us soulless creatures living in three trailers just this side of the fence. Eleven was a bad luck number according to Lon. He had such a strangulating fear of it, he'd spent all week on the phone researching urchins and losers until, with a sigh of relief, he found a former up-and-comer who hadn't panned out. She was now homeless.

This stringy, greasy lost child with a blood blister on her lower lip and a row of black bristles holding together a cut under her left eye stood in the doorway of the club. Susie, fourteen. She was a long way from a princess as she clutched a Foodtown grocery bag tight against her midsection. It was rapidly dissolving from the rain she'd just come out of.

Behind her, Lon's goon, Tire, hovered. He was an oaf in a raccoon coat so shoddy it looked like he'd assembled it himself. It was matted and dripping from the wet. The skies had rained his entire trip to the battered shelter, or flop house, or emergency room, or wherever it was he'd found her, this latest doll, princess, waif.

Tire had no love for his errands even when it was nice out. Tonight he pushed Susie forward into the room and then retreated into the shadow of the door.

I saw doubt, fear, and a lifetime of pain in Susie's eyes and recognized her as one of us. I held up my hand to signal the girls to pause, and stepped toward the waif. She stood still without cowering, but her eyes darted around the room as if she was looking for the closest, safest exit. I walked softly to her and smiled when I reached her. I didn't touch her, didn't fold her in my arms like you would normally do to comfort a lost child. You never know how feral a stray cat is.

Now that she was here, we were twelve and Lon could breathe again.

"I'll show you your room," I said, beckoning with my head to the back door. I headed in that direction and she followed like I was her mother and she had nowhere else to go. Which was true.

Even in the harsh fluorescent light of the trailer's main room, I could see we wouldn't have to do much with Susie's natural blonde hair to get it into shape. Slight bleaching, perhaps. Color highlights. Maybe some extensions. Most of the rest of us needed regular straightening and severe color stripping to get that synchronized platinum look.

I gave Susie the empty bed in my room so I could keep her close. Then I showed her where to kick the wall to get the shower in the bathroom to work. Back in the main room, I emptied her bag on the floor. Out fell a pink plastic purse that looked like something a child would use to carry her Barbie in, a ratty bathrobe that had once been blue but was now gray, and three thongs.

I tossed the bag to the corner, stowed her things in the empty drawer of the cardboard dresser, and gave her one of my nighties. She watched me the whole time without giving any indication of understanding or acceptance of her new place in the world. Didn't even take off her mud-spattered slicker.

"Why don't you take a shower and get some sleep," I suggested. "I'll be back with everybody after the show."

She didn't respond so I had no way of knowing whether or not she understood. I added more information: "I'll lock the trailer behind me; nobody will bother you."

As I reached the door, she asked, "When will he be here?" in a voice like a ghost.

I half-turned. “He?”

“The man.”

I couldn’t imagine who she meant. Actually I could, but I didn’t know if she meant Tire, who was a eunuch as far as I knew, or another unnamed...somebody. What I truly couldn’t imagine was that Tire hadn’t clued her in to anything and yet she came anyway. Probably because it didn’t matter to her.

I took pity on her. “You can come back to the club and watch us if you’d rather,” I said. “You can sit behind the stage. Nobody will know you’re there.”

“Okay,” she said quietly as if she didn’t want to disturb something breakable, didn’t want to make noise, didn’t want to be noticed. Her face was flat with no emotion. I was pretty sure Lon would not have trouble conditioning her—getting her mind right—in the weeks to come. I was wrong.

I installed her by the light panel behind downstage left so she could peek through the crack of the curtain. I forgot about her as soon as the black lights came up and the walls turned neon pink. The patrons disappeared and thoughts of Lon’s work to come faded into the darkness as the music swelled and undulated. Everything was gone except the music and my girls and me. We were the only entities in the world, lost women, the expression of one human being: Lon.

Lon was our savior and master. Whatever was wrong with us, he fixed. Found a program for Katees’ heroin addiction. Got Bets into therapy, cured her cutting behavior. Always gave us cards on our birthdays. One year after Mella’d gone off the deep end, he threw a party for her, complete with a frosted cake.

Got us into church, too. Every Sunday our souls were cleansed, our fears resolved. Whatever was wrong, he fixed. You can see why we were all hooked on Lon: without him, there was only living death, an endless running from the tortures of our former circumstances. He gave us our existence, but more importantly, our purpose.

I'd been at the *Princess Dancer* since the beginning. I knew my own story: my mother a demented witch. Not a good one like Glinda, no, no. This conjurer was a self-destructive paranoid with a propensity toward experimentation. She'd tie me to a table for weeks at a time. I'd go without real food as she tried out her spells and concoctions on me. Mixtures of inedible animal parts and Culpepper herbs of power taken to heights well beyond what the herbalists of medieval time had accomplished. My mother could change a person's health, fortune, or mind. She could create desire where none previously existed, or blink it out to non-existence if the situation required it.

She was never satisfied, though. Always talked about the missing Jesus. I never knew what she meant. Life before death, I supposed. Whatever it was, she never found it and it drove her mad. She eventually turned to botanical addiction. Before that, though, her extreme practices left me in a swirl of pain and blackness. I endured years of abuse until social services put me in a foster home.

A series of homes actually. None particularly nurturing, but none as bad as mother's, either. One of them led me to my destiny, my future. Reinaldo and Maria were a couple of dancing instructors, a husband and wife team. They did a bit of this and a bit of that to make ends meet. I was a "bit of this" for the money from the state. They taught me about rhythm and the connection between movement and music. I learned well and by the age of 16, I'd picked up enough moves to start making money in the clubs. I left them then and went out on my own.

It was harsh and ugly, for I was world-wise but too young to be out in the world of men. Fortunately Lon found me early on. He liked what I did and recruited me. I was the first in a troupe he was putting together. Up until then he'd been a failure in the dance world: graceless and too small to be a *premier danseur*. But he had a dream and enough money to buy the run-down cement block out on Route 121. He adopted me and his dreams unfurled.

I knew the stories of the rest of the girls as well, Janeen, Rega, Katees, and the rest. They were all different, but in essence the same: neglected and

abused, but in some way talented. Good movers, all of them.

Lon pulled each one of us out of the darkness of our previous existences. Everything he did was to make sure we didn't return there. Susie would be number twelve to surrender to Lon, give over her life and love.

A fair trade: Lon gave us life, we gave our undivided devotion: ourselves. Not physically; he was non-sexual, didn't like to be touched by human hands. He gave the love the dead gave Jim Jones. The love you give anybody that saves your life each and every day. The love you give the Sermon on the Mount.

o0o

The crowd is silent: the patrons come in singles. There's no conversation, no sharing of personal fantasies.

Despite the silence, you can barely hear the first ill-defined drumbeats. They're muffled and faraway. The lights dim slowly as the bass begins, hardly perceptible. It follows along, low and gravelly. When the room is half dark, the wisp of a human voice is introduced, a breathy chorus in monotone under an echoing backdrop. Like the voices of angels singing in a dream sequence.

I can't feel you at all.

The room is completely black now as the Florida-green curtain glowing up front pulls back to reveal Janeen and Dany in black neck-to-toe second skins. They curve their right arms forward. Their heads with unearthly platinum hair follow the movement in a wide circle. As the arms reach the end of the arc, their knees rise up a few inches. They make three liquid steps forward and then stop to wait for the resonating music to catch up. When it modulates up half a step, they raise their right arms again to repeat the entire fluid movement.

Patite, Rega, and Carmie join them, stepping forward from the curtain into the black light. Their movements mirror that of Janeen and Dany, but they are two beats behind, a repetition that matches the deep echo of the music.

The next modulation produces Katees, Mella, and Di. Perfect synchronization but a measure behind Janeen and Dany.

Then Bets and Gloria, still perfect, still behind. Then I enter. Alone and pushing the phalanx to the front of the room.

Nothing at all is all we know.

The music rises in volume; the bass and drums pound as one in an agonizingly slow beat that accentuates the stretch of the arm, the circling heads, like the reiterating movements of programmed robots. The glo-light turns our black second skin costumes to silver and the tattoos covering our hands, arms, and faces to a vivid sexual pink. We match the walls and are perfect images of the walking dead.

We are flawless: the princess dancers. The disingenuous light disguises our breath, the deceitful music covers our heartbeat. We are automatons coming off an assembly line, dolls in a fantasy, puppets from Lon's imagination come to life.

Our second skins melt away in the evolving chemical light, revealing featureless bodies as if we were children or plastic toys.

Why do they come to see us? Why do they crave this barren landscape of perfection? This image of non-sentience? When they dream, do they see themselves with us? Or do they see themselves *as* us? Do they seek to be dead, as we pretend to be?

Lon has a rule: no talking with the patrons. He doesn't need the rule because we do not want to talk to them. That would kill the spell, and then we would wake from our own dreams.

I turn at the height of the dance, when the music is the loudest. The voices disappear into a wash of closely looping sound. I turn to lead my girls back to behind the curtains—our puppet box. Just as I turn, an anomaly catches my eye, an unchained sparkle. Unchoreographed and unexpected, it pierces the dark void of the room—the space that neither light nor dancer inhabits. I have never seen it before. It comes from the edge of the curtain in the close space behind the light board, downstage left.

My attention drifts for a moment as my mind forgets itself. Not enough for the girls, or Lon, or the patrons to notice, but it is devastating to me

because I don't know what it is and for the first time in a long time I am uncertain. But a short second later, I am back on track and have forgotten that glimmer.

Only later, after the show is over and I am in my bed, after the girls have gossiped out their guesses at Susie's story, does that sparkle come back to me and keep me from sleep like a mosquito on a humid summer night.

o0o

A tall, impossibly thin African-American, Janeen was the most exotic of us in the white wigs Lon had us all wear, even more exotic than the other blacks. Janeen was special in other ways as well. She had an odd mix of tough nature and sensitive heart that made her strong but not cruel. A victim of heinous spousal abuse, she acted mean at times only as a way of keeping others at bay.

I took advantage of her personal strength once when my consciousness began unraveling. I brought her with me when I went looking for answers from my mother. I couldn't face that woman alone, so Janeen became my prop. If my heart failed, I figured Janeen would lend me hers.

We took the Countyline #3 to Gilt Lane where the purple house with the yellow roof stood in the drooping shade of a willow tree. I'd heard that my mother was well on her way to a shriveled old age by then. Sustained on opium and TV soaps, apparently she had forgotten all about the Jesus. In her life's work, she'd cured all manner of human woes but never ennui.

"Never," I had said to Janeen on the way there, "will I ever seek after my mother's magic."

She nodded but said nothing. I couldn't tell if she was being cynical or helpful.

Then, when I was standing at the end of the lane looking up at the purple house, I lost my nerve completely. "It's no use," I said. "What is it going to prove, anyway?"

"It's your dime," Janeen said. "Do what you want. I'll go if you go, I won't if you don't. Your dime."

I looked at the ground and shook my head, turned around, and flagged the return bus back to the Lounge. Janeen never brought it up and I moved on. But I never forgot.

To offset any perceived tenderness in herself, Janeen liked to display toughness so no one would get too close. She was always the hardest on the new girls, as if they needed to quickly find a place in the pecking order and she was going to help them to it. As if we had a pecking order.

“So where you from, Toots?” she asked Susie at breakfast that first morning following that first night.

Susie was wearing my nightie under her ratty robe. “Well,” she tried to answer.

“Oh, I know what that means,” Janeen said. She laughed and turned to Dany without waiting for an answer.

Susie was not hurt. Or relieved. She reached for a piece of toast from the pile and spread jam on it with slow, regular strokes. The child’s cheeks were pale and you could see through them to the faintly beating veins, but her eyes had a mesmerizing glimmer. We were drawn to the eyes like gnats to sweat. Even Janeen stopped being rude and turned to watch the glimmer. After an eternity of astonished silence, Gloria cut in saying, “Honey, you want some coffee?”

“Yes,” Susie answered plainly. No “thank you” or “please,” as if words were tools, not toys, and needed to be used conservatively so they wouldn’t be used up. Or maybe they had no meaning for her.

No one said anything else during breakfast. Not even Janeen.

I worked with Susie a little after church that day. Asked her to do a couple of steps, follow some of mine. We talked a bit about Lon and the Princess Dancer way of doing things.

Lon was small and never wore flashy clothing. Muted colors, no jewelry, usually just jeans and a t-shirt, sometimes a vest. He was the picture of calm. On the day of introduction, anyway. The day a new girl met him. On those days, he put the comforting wispieness of a lover’s caress into his voice. At the same time he was somehow firm. Gentle but a rock to depend on.

We had just finished eating when he came to our door.

“Susie,” he said sliding slowly into the seat beside her. His hand came to rest on hers just as he came to rest in the chair. Smooth.

Her head swiveled a few degrees toward him and her eyelids fluttered for a second. Her lips parted and she waited for the other shoe to drop.

“Lavinia, here,” he said, ticking his head slightly in my direction, “says you move...well.”

She said nothing, as if she had no idea whether or not that was true or maybe she was weighing the outcome if she agreed. Was this a test? Would she get slapped if she said the wrong thing?

“Take your time, no rush,” Lon said. As if maybe she should take her time responding to him right now. In fact, he meant she should take her time with the work. “Whenever you feel comfortable,” he added.

She watched the tiny dots in the very center of his pupils, fell into them and stayed there, lips parted, mind blank.

I can't feel you at all.

I knew what she was seeing. We all did. Remembered and were envious. Falling into Lon's eyes is the most comforting thing a human can do. There is no turmoil in Lon's eyes. Just love.

The chatter in the room stilled as we watched the transformation. We stayed quiet until a siren far away broke the silence and we again breathed.

Lon rose from the chair in a single, fluid movement, retracting his hand and straightening his legs simultaneously. He backed away to the door, watching Susie as if she was a crystal doll on the edge of a bookshelf. His face held no expression as he turned the doorknob behind him and backed into the night.

Susie blinked in slow motion, pressed her hands against the front of the blouse she'd borrowed from Carmie until her allowance kicked in. She twitched an eyebrow as the new information processed through her brain. Katees tripped over the chair between her and Susie as she rushed over to hug her. We all embraced then. It would not be long before Susie was in the lineup.

As we cuddled, Susie's face was buried in my chest. I looked down to comfort her. A tear streaked her cheek; I was shocked. Was this sparkle forming the same time Lon mesmerized her? I felt a small pang of worry at that moment. Nothing major, just a seed of concern. It would be a while before it flowered into full-blown anxiety, but that would eventually come.

Lon was a task master, relentless. He locked us in at night. He slapped us when we acted up. Kept food from us if we gained weight. Forced us to go to church. Made us sign out and sign back in when we went shopping and never let us out for any other reason. He restricted our access to news, TV, Internet, phones.

We understood the rules and the harshness, agreed with them, in fact. Lon had invested his entire life and reputation in us. If we messed up, the *Princess Dancers* would go down the tubes and the patrons would stop coming. If we didn't have patrons, Lon would not make money. If Lon didn't make money, we'd all have to return to the world we once knew. No restriction of life or movement was too great a sacrifice to ensure that would never happen.

I feared this tear on Susie's cheek, this emotion that should have been wiped out during Lon's dialogue with her. I feared her effect. This child with diamond glitter eyes needed protection and something more, even. Something we sensed but never understood, indefinable yet somehow required for her precarious existence. How could we, the lost women, give that to her? Anything actually, but especially that. We had nothing but an extended arm followed by a turning head.

Susie threatened the dream, the quiet course Lon had mapped for us. She would never acclimate the way the rest of us had, or maybe the word is acquiesce. In the weeks to come, I could hear her heart beating because she kept it on her sleeve. Her eyes were always filled to the brim from some unexplained sadness. Nothing we ever did expelled it completely. She had moments of frivolity, but her hurt was deeper than any of ours. We gave as much love and protection as we could, but she needed something else. Something we couldn't put our finger on. Nobody said anything about it.

We thought we could handle it, or maybe we hoped it would go away eventually.

Through it all was the sparkle: a line to life never quite offset by her personal tragedy. I loved the sparkle. I never admitted it to anyone, not even myself, but I was glad she hadn't lost it. Even as I worried about its effect on Lon's tightly controlled balance of the *Princess Dancer*, I loved it.

Susie turned out to be a good mover; her small fluid movements fit in perfectly with the rest of ours. Despite her ragged emotions, by the end of two weeks she knew the routine, the arm sweeps and head circles. The second skin we ordered for her came in and the facial tattoos we applied healed; she entered the lineup, right next to me.

Lon breathed easier now that we were no longer an unlucky eleven, but for the first time ever, he stopped watching the shows. He stayed in the office behind the bar when we were on, sending Tire for takeout. He emerged only after the last show and never visited us in the trailers. He was spooked in a way the lucky twelve could not overcome.

I don't think he was even aware of it, at first. But after two months of ignoring us, or rather, ignoring the light in Susie's eyes, he finally admitted to himself that here was something new. Someone who resisted his charm. Something that threatened his order, his authority.

One day at two in the morning we heard him yelling outside our trailer. "Who do you think you are?" he screamed at the door.

We were all sitting around the table, still cooling down from the show. When the door slammed back, he was standing in a halo of light reflecting off a drizzly mist outside. He had the sour smell of J.D. on his breath. We all sensed it. Even Rega, sitting in the far corner, slowed her rhythmic knitting for a second.

He climbed the rickety steps and stood in the doorway, mumbling, with his eyes cast on the floor. He spoke to no one directly but we knew who he was thinking about. As he tried pulling himself in, he tottered and then rested against the jamb for balance. His head swiveled like a sprung jack-in-the-box as he looked from face to face. When he saw Susie, he fell forward toward her. Before I had time to react, he had his hands on her neck.

I jumped to his back and pulled him off. At six feet, I can call on the strength of an Amazon if inspired. His little, has-been dancer's body under the influence is not much for me under the right conditions. I threw him against the wall, where he slid down to a heap and sobbed silently.

Patite pulled Susie into her lap and began rocking her as she moaned and watched a spot on the carpet. A single, shining tear tracked her cheek.

I pushed past Lon on the floor and ran out to the club. The back door was hanging on a single hinge. Rain puddled in the doorway.

"Tire!" I screamed through the darkened building.

o0o

"Lon's on vacation," I told the group the next day after Tire had driven him to the *Easy Does It* in Jerseytown. We were at breakfast in the dining trailer. It was no longer thundering, but the rain was continuing as a light shower. The humidity was high and the walls sweated.

"Like last time?" Janeen, of course, said.

While Lon was away, I began trying out some new moves to keep us challenged. A back bend to the floor, a couple of slow sashays, things Lon would never have thought up. It was stimulating, but I looked forward to Lon's return when I could retire my choreographer's hat.

During this time, something changed. Specifically, Janeen. She grew from bold to defiant. On the first Saturday of Lon's absence, she snuck out, hopped the Countyline #3, and returned late for the show, her face flushed, her blouse damp from perspiration, her boots scuffed.

I said nothing. The performance that night was flawless as usual, but underneath it a current of insurrection festered.

The following day at church, Janeen and Dany sat way in the back. Their whispers echoed off the walls of the nave, seemingly coming from everywhere. I turned to look and saw the two of them with their heads bent in together, giggling.

The Saturday after that they were both gone all day. Shopping, they said, but they came back late, breathless, flushed, and with no packages. Dany's right shoe was cracked at the back seam.

Finally, half a month after Lon left, Tire brought him back. He stepped out of the Caddy with a broad smile and wide-open arms. Everybody but Susie gathered around him. She'd been doing well in his absence, learned to control her eyes, and was still as a doll on the stage.

We resettled into our former comfort zone and the routine. I thought so, anyway, but on his first Saturday back, half the group went shopping and came back flushed, with their clothes in disarray and their shoes ruined. The next time, it was just me and Susie waiting for everybody else to return.

At first, I thought Susie stayed because she understood the seriousness of the situation: the girls were losing their balance and someone had to stay grounded. Now I know she stayed because I needed her. Janeen's actions frightened me. Susie kept my mind off all that. Kept me optimistic. Somehow, her sparkle buoyed me.

They flew in fifteen minutes before curtain that day, laughing. Laughing! Carmie was barefoot.

I rushed them into their second skins and then we were on.

After the show, I pulled Janeen out of the stream of dancers exiting to the wings. She resisted little as if she were still a proper puppet, or maybe she thought that whatever I was going to say didn't mean much.

She leaned back against the wall and lifted her long, long silver lashes to look at me. I said nothing and waited for her. Finally, with a slight smile on one corner of her lip, she said, "Come and see."

"Why?" I asked. I wanted to scream that she was crazy and what the hell was going on here, but I restrained myself. Stayed calm.

"Just come," she said, as if it needed no further explanation.

I vowed to myself that I wouldn't, regardless of how much I thought I should check on the girls and maybe exert some control over their truancy. I promised myself I would never go see whatever it is. All I wanted was to maintain the routine, the world of the *Princess Dancer*.

I would have kept my promise, except that on Thursday Lon had had enough and did the unspeakable. A short time after we'd fallen asleep, he came crashing into the trailer and pulled Susie from her bed, dragged her by the hair to the front room, and flung her across the table. We knew what

was coming and jumped to stop him, but Tire stood with his signature tool—a tire iron—between us and Lon. We barked and clawed like dogs slathering behind a slatted fence, straining to get to the intruder. Every once in a while Tire would crack the wall with the bar to get us to jump back.

Susie did not cry, did not scream when Lon laid his belt across her back with flesh tearing force. Her body shuddered with each lash. And each lash raised a strip of bloody beads, but she never cried.

For a quarter of an hour, he beat her. You wouldn't think so much could be accomplished in so short a time. It was just fifteen minutes, but I feared the damage would last forever.

After he left, we lifted her limp body and carried her to the bathroom. Katees filled the tub. She and Bets bathed her gently and dabbed her dry. Afterward, Carmie dressed her back and legs with salve, and Janeen gave her a couple of Ambesleeps. We put her to bed on her stomach with the covers off.

She was gone in the morning before we woke as if the drugs had had no effect.

I skipped breakfast and rounded up Tire. Lon had gone home after his sadistic debauchery of the night before. Without him around, it was easy to talk Tire into driving me into Centreville to look for her. I told him Lon would be angry if he found out she was gone. Tire was devoted to Lon, but Lon saw Tire as nothing more than a bouncer and driver, and never confided in him. There was no way Tire could connect Lon's problems with Susie's sparkle. He thought about what I said and gladly took me around to the shelters, churches, and soup kitchens.

I returned home in the evening, empty-handed. I could think of nothing to do to ease my fears for Susie, who wouldn't make it out in the world of the wide-awake. Nor could I ease my fears for Lon and the balance at the *Princess Dancer*. My brain raced back and forth over every aspect of the tragedy. The clashing thoughts rose to a feverish intensity. I thought I'd lose my mind if I didn't do something. I told Janeen I would take the Countyline with her to wherever it was she went on Saturday. Anything to get away from the maddening effect of our drama.

At noon, Countyline #3 stopped at the QuikMart half a mile up on 121. We boarded and rode in silence toward Centreville. I told myself I wouldn't look down Gilt Lane when we passed by, but my eyes did it of their own accord. The road had almost closed over by overgrowth of brambles, so there was very little to see.

The bus continued on through the outer suburbs and then into the city proper. Winter rain subsided to an ineffectual drizzle as the bus swung down Main Street.

Centreville is the typical mid-sized city that was abandoned by big manufacturing long ago, but not long enough that it's had time to bounce back, however. In the middle of the ghost town looms the *Shadowland Ballroom*, a reminder of shinier times when Centreville was the center of action and people actually traveled there to visit.

The building is four stories high and constructed of a brilliant red brick that shows through wherever the grime has caked and fallen off. It's square-shaped and takes up the entire block. Running along the periphery of the top floor all the way around is a bank of stained glass windows. Two-story high windows on the first and second floors each have a faded, green awning. A canopy covers the entrance to the double doors in front, as well. Sadly, the canvas of awnings and canopy is threadbare and ripped in a number of places. The building has seen a lot of years. Still, its former magnificence is there in the façade if you know how to look.

The bus pulled up to the curb. We disembarked and, as we crossed to the *Shadowland*, a plastic Foodtown bag floated across our path. It flew down the street and caught on a mullein plant the size of a juniper shrub in the middle of the sidewalk.

Janeen held the building's massive doors open for us. She was excited to be showing off her find, her new thing, to me. As if I was a prodigal son and now we were all in it together again. I saw her enthusiasm but could not catch it, as my thoughts were still on Susie for the most part.

On through the entrance hallway we filed, leaving our raincoats on wall pegs. Inside I stood on the threshold of a room so large, it took my breath away. For the first time that day, I stopped worrying.

Hanging from sections of the ceiling were four chandeliers, each as big as a house trailer. They lit the room with a soft yellow glow. The walls were papered in a fleur-de-lis pattern of textured gold and maroon velvet. On the dance floor, hundreds of couples were embracing, or kissing, or in some way hanging on each other. They were wearing the same type of casual Saturday afternoon attire we had on: Capri pants, sloppy shirts, goofy backward-facing caps on the men. The floor was a pale-colored oak, so highly polished you could see the feet and legs of the dancers reflected in it.

Up in the front of the room, a man dressed in a black tux stood on a stage and addressed the room through a microphone. "Come in, come in," he called to us. "Find a partner. There are so many delicious possibilities to choose from." He pointed to the wall to our left, where a group of young men stood waiting, seemingly for us.

Janeen stepped forward and without saying anything chose one and took his hand, actually touched him! They disappeared into the crowd. The others followed her example, but I held back until only one man remained. My partner.

He held out his hand to me. I stepped toward him and said, "I'm sorry, but I don't know how." I shook my head as I said it so he would understand.

His hand remained in the air, demanding mine. I opened my mouth to protest further, but instead of uttering an apology, my hand reached for his. The electrical connection of skin on skin signaled the music, a vigorous piano glissando sliding into a relentless mambo bass. I turned my head to get my bearings just as the dancers grabbed each other for the downbeat.

"Just let the music take you," the man on the stage directed us. He wasn't talking to me specifically, but I felt myself listening as if he were.

My partner pulled me in, as easily as if I was a pull toy on wheels. With his arm circling my waist, he swung me into the fray. I let the music take me the same way Lon's erotic mix takes me in the dance of the dead. But this music was fast and hard. There was no poetry here, only lurid energy.

The chandeliers slowly dimmed to a diffuse spot as we swirled through the crowd. The daylight outside filtered through the stained glass, coloring us with red, green, and blue patches. In the dim light, our clothing and that of all the dancers became full-skirted dresses and zoot suits, seamed stockings and pointed dance shoes. We twirled and hopped and flew through the air. We screamed and whirled. Our partners dropped us to the floor, spun us around, lifted us back to their arms. The music propelled our movements. We surrendered to it, the way you surrender to a train and go where the rails take you. They squeezed, we clung.

Moments later, the music ended. I slid to the floor along my partner's body, exhausted. The lights slowly came up. I opened my eyes. My partner was gone and the dancers were leaving. Janeen pulled me to my feet.

"We have to go," she said.

Her face was blotchy red and her hands swollen from the push/pull of the dancing. She was back in her pedal pushers and granny scarf. My own ball gown was gone as well, my shoes scuffed and cracked.

I smiled but hung my head, resolute in our mandate.

"By the way, Susie's coming back with us." Janeen said.

"Susie?" I jumped up, turned, and searched each Princess Dancer's face for the one that had occupied my mind for most of the past two days.

The girls calmly parted and Susie stepped through. Her eyes dazzled me. The light shot out, brighter than that from the chandeliers overhead. "I knew you'd be here," she said.

"Susie," I said, folding her into my arms gently, concerned for her bruises. My breath came as a panting, and I thought I felt her shudder. In spite of remnants of the rapture still in my head, my thoughts drifted back to the *Princess Dancer*. "It'll be okay," I promised.

She nodded silently like a child that doesn't quite believe it. I didn't quite believe it either, but I didn't care. Susie was with us. We were lucky twelve again.

"It won't be okay if we miss the bus," Janeen said. She pulled us toward the door.

The bus took us away from our dreamland back through the vacated heart of Centreville. The city buildings eventually gave way to the low-slung houses of the suburbs, which in turn gave way to edges of scrub and weed. Far from ebbing, the influx of *Shadowland* energy grew in me with each passing street corner. I was invigorated, alive, awake, maybe even brave.

The Countyline dropped us back at the Quickmart. We walked to the club where the neon sign on the roof popped and buzzed; the final “s” of *Princess* flickered. Soon it would go out altogether. We shivered in the drizzle and entered.

Lon said nothing, but as he watched us file in, his eyes stayed on Susie. I watched him and made sure I stood between the two of them, all the while keeping track of Tire’s movements.

Nothing happened, though, and the show was flawless that night, the patrons happy. Nevertheless, I found it hard to relax into the dull state required for the dance. My blood was still swinging from the afternoon’s activity.

Afterward, I sent the girls to the kitchen trailer and entered our sleeper alone. As I suspected, Lon was inside, at the table with his feet up, drunk but awake. His eyes were half-closed as he watched me. A mostly empty bottle of J.D. rested at his crotch. He smoked a roll-your-own.

“Lon,” I said at the same time he said, “Where’d you go?”

I collapsed my umbrella, shook it just outside the door, and then opened it wide for draining.

“Nowhere,” I answered.

So quick I hardly know what happened, he jumped up, shoved the table to the side, and slammed me into the corner by the door. The umbrella fell away. “Where’d you go?” he screamed in my ear.

I tried swallowing, but he was using his elbow to pin my neck to the wall. I gagged several times until he let up. When I fell to the floor next to the umbrella, he kicked my knee, shooting a flash of pain up my leg.

“You’re going to hobble me,” I squeezed out as my lungs sought breath. He dropped to his knees, grabbed my hair, and pulled my head back.

“Where’d you go?”

I coughed, breathed. "To Centreville," I whispered.

He threw my head away like a sack of fish. It bounced off the wall, but I remained conscious.

"I know that?" he said. "Why?"

"We had to find Susie," I answered.

"You should have let that little waif go," he said, inches from my face.

I had him then. I turned my face so we were eye to eye. My breath returned and I stated quietly, almost a whisper, so he had to lean in to hear me, "But without her, we're only eleven."

He jumped back, flicked his dead cigarette at my face, and threw the door open. He stomped heavily down the rickety wooden landing. It creaked and swayed in response to his unsteady movements. His final step-off released a reverberating crack. I didn't see him again for days.

What I felt during that time was something new and indescribable. At least by me. A poet would find a word for it, but I'm not such a poet, so I had none. All I knew was that I had experienced something new and alive. I hardly dared think about it as I racked my brain for solutions to the problem of Lon. Every so often, though, my thoughts turned back with a thrill to the night at the *Shadowland Ballroom*. I tried to suppress them, going through the motions of keeping the girls' heads on, but they kept popping into my head at odd moments.

We practiced. I came up with some new moves, pretending Lon wasn't absent and we needed to push on as usual. I wanted us to be normal, but all the time an indescribable joy bubbled up through the veneer of fortitude, threatening our little world.

I stayed in an ever-changing mental frame, mostly of anxiety, but not always. Awake, breathing, full of energy, mostly, but underneath it all, a voice urging me to get us back to Lon's plan. His balance. Maybe the others were calm, and ignorant of the potential danger, but I remained uncertain about the future, imagining the *Princess Dancer's* downward spiral as Lon lost touch and control.

I told myself I wouldn't return to the *Shadowland* and then eventually everything would make it back to normal. Susie would lose her sparkle,

stop giving Lon the creeps. The girls would stay home with me. We'd go to church on Sunday like before. But when Saturday rolled around, my resolve disappeared and I was on the Countyline with everyone else.

This went on for a month. Lon stayed away from the trailers as if we had contracted an unnamed disease. I barely saw him in the club. I could hear him shouting garbled orders to Tire in the office, but I never asked about it. Tire remained loyal to Lon and gave us no information, but one day he finally got spooked, himself. He unburdened himself about how a week previously he'd found Lon sitting in a field half a mile down Route 121. It was raining, and Lon was just sitting there, unshivering as if it wasn't 50 degrees out. He was watching the Blue Hills the way bird lovers do. Except he didn't have any binoculars. He'd been there all afternoon, according to Tire who, once he found him there, loaded him into the Caddy, drove him home, and bundled him into bed. Lon didn't show up at the club for two days after that. He was losing touch with us, or maybe himself.

I fretted about it and started staying awake during the performances. My eyes remained alert, my brain engaged. For the first time ever, I looked at the faces of the death wishers that watched. I don't know why I looked. Maybe because the music for once didn't numb me. In my newfound awareness, I watched Lon as he paced behind the bar, behind the men with their heads turned toward us. I saw him stop and stare back at me, one eye closed like he was drawing a bead. He leaned over to a man in a homburg standing at the far end. Lon lifted his hand, pointing to me with two fingers. The man in the homburg looked from under his brim and nodded.

The action appeared to me in slow motion, as if I was dreaming it. They had no idea I could see them, couldn't know I was aware. Nevertheless, my blood turned to ice. I forced myself to go numb to avoid passing out. The *Shadowland* exhilaration was swept completely away then. With nothing but fear to take its place, I threw up as soon as we were off-stage.

The following Saturday, the man in the homburg got on the Countyline at the stop after ours. Fear gripped me when I saw him standing by the roadside. As he boarded, my mind raced, seeking a solution, reviewing options, guessing at what Lon's intentions were.

I leaned over to Janeen and whispered her name.

She sensed my dread and placed her head on my shoulder. For the second time in our lives, she lent me her heart, infusing me with strength I wouldn't have had on my own. She brushed the hair back from my face in a motherly move that seemed un-Janeenlike. "What?" she whispered.

"We have to go home," I said staring through the triangle of raindrops the wipers left behind on the windshield.

"We are going home," she answered, still whispering.

"No. My other home," I answered.

She understood: my mother's. "We can't, we don't have time," she said.

"We have time. We're not going back to the *Princess* tonight."

And because her heart was beating for both of us, I knew she would follow me, even if she didn't know what I had in mind.

At Gilt Lane, long before the stop for the *Shadowland Ballroom*, I stood up. Janeen motioned to the girls to get off. They followed unquestioningly.

Once off the bus, we walked for half a mile down the road. The street turned first from pavement to gravel, then from gravel to dirt. At the very end of the lane, the purple house with the yellow roof stood as it always had, with the sun shining down on the narcissus and hyacinths and belladonna and jasmine surrounding the lily pond. The willow on the far end draped both the water and the house.

Janeen gripped my arm with one hand and placed her other arm around my back to propel me forward. Her head remained on my shoulder, her heart still beating for both of us, still helping me to return to the place I had no strength for. I tried to deaden the memories, but I had no music to cover them. The pain and horror settled firmly onto my shoulders.

Without looking, I knew the man in the homburg was lurking behind the tangle of multiflora roses growing along the road and on into the surrounding woods. I felt his eyes following us as we made our way to the house.

At the door, Janeen told the girls to wait outside. Without knocking, we entered the house.

My mother was lying in the front room, watching a blank TV. Her hair had gone silver, her skin flaccid. She rested her head on the arm of the sofa.

For a moment she looked up from her opium stupor, regarded me, and then nodded back to sleep. I tried shaking her awake, but her eyes remained closed. Then as if an alarm clock rang, her eyes blinked open and widened. She sat up in a jolt and her jaw began vibrating as if she was trying to talk but had no strength for it. She was looking toward the door, holding her arms out. I turned and saw Susie standing there.

“Come to me,” my mother croaked in a voice that sounded like it hadn’t been used in a decade.

“I need a root,” I answered, as if she was talking to me.

With what seemed to be difficulty, she tore her eyes from Susie and moved them to mine. “You know where it is,” she said.

I beckoned Susie to come in and sit on the couch next to the old woman who sobbed like a baby as Susie approached.

I walked through the unused kitchen and on down to the pitch black cellar where I swung my hands through the air until I felt the string for the bulb. A meager yellow glow lit up the outlines of the willow’s roots as they grew along the floor. An axe leaned against the rock face that made up one wall.

Somewhere the ethereal voices of the music came to me. Faraway and soft, they lifted slightly as I stepped toward the axe. And then they lifted again when my hand touched it.

You are a miracle, my friend.

I raised the axe above my head. The voices rang clear.

You are the music in my heart, the painting in the stars.

The axe crashed onto a single gnarled knot, dislodging a chunk, simultaneously silencing the voices.

I dropped the axe, grabbed the piece of willow, and ran up the stairs.

In the front room, my mother was sitting up, animated and trembling. Finger-shaped tendrils of hair stood up, splayed at the back of her head where she’d laid against the sofa. The skin of her face was as wrinkled as that of an old Indian. Her dress was once a bright turquoise and flaming

pink, but now was faded to grayish green and salmon. Her stockings had fallen below her knees. She wore no shoes.

I tossed the root onto her lap. She stared at it as if not recognizing it, but I knew she knew what it was. Janeen tugged lightly on Susie, who stood now and backed away. I sat in Susie's place.

My mother's head slowly swiveled to me. It dangled on her neck as if being held up by a spring. "What you want?" she asked, petulantly.

"Love," I answered.

She waved her hand over the root. "There," she said dismissively, before closing her eyes and rolling her head to the back of the couch.

I grabbed the root, bit off a piece of the outer skin, and chewed past the burning sensation, forcing myself to swallow. I choked but swallowed more. Instantly my throat swelled and I fell to my knees as I tried breathing past the burning glob stuck in my throat. My stomach retched. I felt bile trying to crawl up and around the piece of root. My body convulsed.

Janeen ran to the kitchen. I could barely hear her shuffling through the cupboard, slapping the faucet on, running back with water. The sound was far away. Maybe I imagined it, but within seconds she was back in the room, grabbing my hair, pulling my head back, pouring. I swallowed, sputtered, gagged, coughed. Finally the chunk flew against my teeth. I chewed the root to a pulp even as it stripped the lining of my mouth. I sipped water and swallowed until the bulge passed into my gut.

I sat and breathed while my blood returned to normal circulation. After a few minutes, Janeen and Susie helped me rise to my feet. My legs felt rubbery but I summoned some of Janeen's strength.

"You can go," my mother's crackly voice said.

We turned to her. She'd raised her head and her eyes were looking at us. They were moist, pleading. "But can't you leave her?" she said, meaning Susie.

It angered me. Hadn't she taken enough from me? What did I owe her? "No," I said, quietly, though I wanted to scream it in her ear, the same way Lon always screamed in ours if we missed a beat.

Her eyes opened wide and for a moment my knees weakened again. She seemed to be summoning some of her old strength, the old dominant position. But quickly she bowed her head, nodded slowly. She reached for my hand and patted it. I snatched it away and hurried Susie and Janeen out.

I turned at the door to spit a “Go to hell” at her, but her eyes were back in la-la land, unreachable as always. Still no closure for me.

We took the Countyline in the direction of the *Shadowland*.

“We’ll be late,” Janeen said.

“Doesn’t matter,” I answered.

She cocked an eyebrow to the others and they followed.

Lon’s man hopped onto the bus and disembarked at the same stop as us. I knew he would. He no longer hid himself as we entered the dark building. He merely stood inside the door as we removed our coats. When the girls pushed through the doors into the ballroom, I hung back. Once there was no one left in the hallway but me and him, I said, “Welcome.”

He tipped the homburg and as he raised his eyes I looked squarely at him. The root took hold.

I swore long ago I’d never seek after my mother’s magic, but you know they say, “Never say never.” As the root took hold, the memories of it all—the table, the electrodes, the elixirs, potions, and wounds—came to me. I learned what my mother had learned from all those experiments. The secrets of the universe, I suppose. The way to men’s hearts. Had my pain and horror been worth it? I supposed it had. As the root took hold, I believed it had all been worth it. Even if she had never found the Jesus.

Lon’s man joined me in the ballroom and I accepted my legacy: my mother’s power, insanity, and love. The body of the man in the homburg connected to mine, and the walls of the ballroom disappeared in the haze of magical dream concoction. We swung from the stars. From the moon. At times the music rushed by, loud and dry, and then it drifted to a dim and shadowy distance, full of reverberation. We traveled at the speed of light through galaxies old and new, and all the way to infinity, returning to the ballroom only when the final refrain faded, a few moments after it started.

At the bewitching hour of midnight, long after the time the buses stopped running, Janeen and I led our girls into the night. Lon's man, my lover, summoned taxis for us and we returned to the *Princess Dancer*, where the sign on the roof had by now gone dark. Inside, only the bar lamps were on. A glow of weak light emanated from the windows, falling to the ground. I knew Lon was waiting for us, Tire off to the side and leaning against the wall. We entered the club.

Just as I imagined, Lon was sitting on a stool behind the bar, his feet up, and a fifth of J.D. resting in his crotch. He smoked a roll-your-own, which he flicked to the floor before speaking. "Deek," he said in a voice that sounded like it hadn't been used in a decade.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lon's man tip his homburg. He was standing on the edge of our huddle, not in front, not in back, but off to the side toward Tire.

"So?" Lon said, still speaking to Deek.

"They went to Centreville."

"And what did they do in Centreville?"

"Dance."

Lon coughed a whiskey laugh, silent almost, except for the rasping breath. Then he stopped laughing and dipped his head in slow affirmation. As we waited for the next thing to happen, he said, "Tire?" making it sound like a question. But it was an order and Tire has no subtlety. With him it's either yes or no, go or stay.

The next thing happened in a flick of a cigarette butt, the wink of an eye, the snap of a bone, but it feels like slow motion as I relive it now.

Tire leaped forward and grabbed Susie where she stood next to the man in the homburg. He threw her against the wall he'd been leaning against and placed his fat hands around her neck, easily encircling them. They could have wrapped around twice, Susie was no more than 14 and hadn't eaten a full meal in the past 13 and $\frac{3}{4}$ years. With Susie's life passing before my eyes, I sprang forward and onto Tire's back. I clawed at his eyes. Behind me, Lon kicked off the chair, reached under the bar, and retrieved Tire's favorite weapon. Just as Lon's man pulled his hand out of his coat pocket

and aimed at Lon, the tire iron landed square where it would cripple a dancer for life, with enough force to smash a dream to infinity and back just as the final refrain fades.

My mother's legacy always came with a caveat. You only give to Paul what you steal from Peter, and perpetual motion machines are a chimera. You get what you pay for. Amen.

Lon died. The man in the homburg went to jail. I became paralyzed.

But this is a happy ending. The girls—me, Janeen, Susie, everybody—inherited the *Princess Dancer Lounge*. We fired Tire, who got off lucky as we saw it. He should have been in jail.

Eventually, we learned that Susie wasn't 14, she was 18, thinned from years living under the regime of an insane stage parent who made sure she maintained her weight. Her perpetual sadness was born of a life doing the loathsome dance. She hated it. We let her retire so she never had to do it again. As soon as she quit the lineup, she ballooned up like the jolly fat lady in the circus of dreams. We gave her the job of club hostess. The light in her eyes, the inexhaustible sparkle that couldn't be extinguished no matter how much she cried, expanded until she lit up the club as much as the pink neon sign on the roof.

Turned out schmoozing was her calling. She opened up like a new-born flower. Talked to the patrons, teased them, enticed them with a quick flutter of movement and a "Can't you do better than a fatso?" They adored her and she found two things she'd never had: self love and purpose.

I'm the boss now. Janeen's the bouncer. The girls no longer do the dance of the dead. We don't even do shows. The *Princess Dancer Lounge* is a ballroom now. We teach dancing and have contests on the weekend. We take our students to the moon, to the stars. Once a year, we ride the Countyline to the *Shadowland Ballroom* for an exhibition. My choreography, of course.

I speak to Lon's man in the homburg, Deek, every day through the root magic. He worships me. We dance together in my dreams. He'll get out one day; he saved Susie's life, after all. He'll come to me then. I will use my

mother's root magic to relearn how to walk, maybe even dance. Thanks, Mom.

My mother passed away before I could thank her properly. Or forgive her. Her pain stays with me. I keep thinking of the pitiful way she begged us to leave Susie, who she thought in her senility was the Jesus she had always sought. Once I sent Susie to visit her. Susie came back and said the purple house with the yellow roof was empty except for weeds growing up from the basement. My mother had probably been gone about a year by then. Probably left the day we abandoned her.

It usually doesn't make me sad. I am not sad that she made choices that wound her up where she's at while I enjoy heaven. Nor am I sad that she died unfulfilled, without the Jesus.

But sometimes on a rare rainy day, I think about the way she patted my hand that last time I saw her. On those days, I hop the wheel chair-enabled Countyline #3 and get off at Gilt Lane. I wheel up as close as I can get to the purple house and sit for an hour or two. I shed a single tear and then return home.

Nimuë's Tale

Madeleine E. Robins

One who plays with time barely notices its passing. The green of the forest trembled on the verge of autumn when Malla's husband Oulen told me there were strangers in the village.

I knew. Why else did my heart beat with such heavy strokes, my hands tremble as I put my work aside? By the time I had taken off my apron, unpinned the sleeves of my tunic to hang properly from my elbows and smoothed my hair from my forehead, and had instructed Landra to have wine and honey ready to refresh the visitors, they were in my courtyard.

Pelles looked well, but older; brash enthusiasm was given way to a sterner carriage. His attention was all for his companion; he had dismounted and was at her side before I stepped from my door. She smiled at him, then turned and let her eyes meet mine, as if it had been moments, an hour, a day since she sent me forth from the Lake House.

"Nimuë, how brown you've become," the Lady said.

All my learning deserted me. I was the girl I had been when last I had seen her face.

oOo

One last time, the old man's hands stole up to tweak my breast (and him thinking I would not notice it). Once more, apology in his wet-mouthed smile (as if a smile could atone for a twelvemonth of listening to his ancient rambling boasts while I tried to remember to simper up at him). One more time, I leaned away from the old enchanter's narrow shadow, all the while trying to make myself lean toward him, seeking to intoxicate him with my scent and nearness.

I was a very bad seductress. I did not mean to destroy him.

He had backed me toward a wall to explain some trifling relic, one more of his interminable lessons. As he talked, I watched from the corner of my eye: his hand moved stealthily up to toy with the fiery plait of hair that lay across my breast. The thousandth gesture, the sum of a thousand gestures. It made my stomach turn. With no idea what I was doing, no more hope than to get away from him, I reached into myself and out, pulled down and away and I knew not how, stretching and pulling, venting my rage and disgust: that he should want me. That he should dare want anything young and fresh and beautiful.

The glittering cave began to tremble. Pyrite-streaked stone crashed down around us, and I pulled away from him and ran with all my strength through the chambers, up the rough-hewn stone steps, tracing the branching path back to sunlight and clean spring air.

For long minutes I stood in the adit and waited until my pulse slowed and the world lost its film of red panic. The rumble and crash of stone had ceased and there was silence behind me in the cave. When I could think enough to realize that I must do something, there was only one thing to do, natural as breathing. Our horses were tethered to a gnarled apple tree near the cave mouth. In a trembling dream, I loosed old Merlin's mare and set her running. Then I mounted my own and turned her toward home: not Camelot, whence the enchanter and I had ridden out that morning. I turned east, toward the House of the Lake and my lady.

In that same dreaming way, I rode through a green and blossoming countryside I did not see. When I was not minding the road (or seeking it anew; I was often lost) I tried to imagine a homecoming to the Lake House after a year. How Sister Eilon would look when she found me standing at the oaken gate; the smell of beeswax, incense, and clean rushes in the Chapter hall; the murmur of women's voices in the workroom. All the things I had longed for in the year of bright noise and bustle in Camelot.

I thought of the Lady. I told myself she would understand my flight, what I had done (what *had* I done?) to the wizard. After all, she herself had told me of men, had shared dismissive laughter after each of her dealings with

them. She *would* understand, I told myself with one breath. With the next, I remembered that I had failed her, and I trembled.

And when I had lulled those fears from my heart and rode on, half asleep, I would have a vision of old Merlin buried under half the sparkling mountain, struggling for the last stale taste of air, trapped in the cold darkness and cursing me.

It was a blessing to find myself lost again, and in finding the route clear, to forget my fears for another few miles.

I arrived at the House near dark of the second day, hungry and dirty and fearful and so grateful to be home that I nearly wept. Sister Eilon made one startled exclamation at the sight of me, then opened the gate, saw that my horse was taken to the stable by one of her helpers, and brought me herself to a room where I could bathe, eat, and sleep.

oOo

The Lady saw me in the Library after Terce the next morning. She was more beautiful than I remembered, tall and cool in the green morning light. She smiled and my heart rejoiced and I knew everything would be well. I schooled myself not to show my joy too openly, to stand with my eyes downcast, waiting for her embrace. It came, a brief touch of her cheek to mine that turned my heart to water. Then she took my chin in the palm of her hand and tilted my face up to read what was written there.

“What happened, Nimüe?” Her voice was poised at the edge of concern, sweet and low.

I made myself brave and told her. “My lady, I think the enchanter is dead.”

I could not read what she felt at the news: something like a smile was quickly gone and replaced with a frown and a tiny nervous tic in her brow. “Merlin dead? *How?*” Then, “You *think* he is dead? And why have I not had some word of this from Camelot?”

I began to explain. I told her of the stone quaking around us, and how I had run and heard the walls crashing down behind me, sealing the old man in. “Lord Merlin often disappeared for days to the cave, even the King

himself knew better than to seek for him. I don't know how long it will be before they miss us in Camelot."

She nodded without hearing. "But are you sure he is dead? How? Who could have done such a thing?"

I swallowed and looked at the floor. "My lady, I think—I'm afraid—I did."

"You?" She looked startled; her hand dropped from my chin. "Did you learn so much in Camelot?" Her eyes were avid. I ached to please her, to be able to tell her *yes*.

"No, Lady. I don't know what I did. I don't know how I did it. I just... did."

She stood away from me, walked the length of her chamber until she was hidden in a spill of morning light from the window. Her shadow trembled. "You just *did* what?"

The words outran my tongue as I tried to make her understand. "I could not bear it any longer, he kept touching me, grabbing at me." I waited for the nod of understanding which surely must come. I filled the silence with more words, waiting for her to stop me. "I don't know what I did, my lady, but he reached for me again and I could not stand it, I *could not*. It was something inside me that came out and...and brought the cave down, like a flood. I was so angry, him with his boasts and his lies! He told me he'd never seen an aura of power like mine, he swore he'd teach me everything, but it was like sifting barley to find a dram of wisdom in his brags. I could have waited forever for his true secrets!"

She stood like a statue in the light; I could not see her face. "You destroyed him." Her voice was wondering. "Because he touched you."

I nodded.

"He *touched* you?" She stepped from the masking light and her face was tight and there was fear or rage in her eye. "You fool, he must have touched you a thousand times in the twelvemonth. That was your purpose, to smile and fawn and listen and be *touched*. To suffer whatever the old man would do to you to gain his secrets."

A great trembling took me; I grew small under her anger. Somewhere inside, a tiny rebellious voice insisted that it was all very well to talk of failure; *she* had not been pinched and patted by those palsied hands, not suffered whispers in *her* ear. But when I looked up at the fine planes of the Lady's face, burning cold with rage, I forgot anger and was miserable.

"What did you do?" she hissed. "Why didn't he break free? How could *you* destroy him?"

Again I tried to tell her of the fear and disgust that had broken in me, of the reaching and twisting and tearing, of murmuring words I did not know and could not remember. Nothing I said softened her expression. She listened with her arms crossed before her, hands tucked into the wide dark sleeves of her robe.

"I don't know," I finished. "It was as if something burst inside of me. It did the damage, *it* sealed old Merlin in the cave. Not me, my lady. Please..."

I thought my confusion moved her at last. She came toward me and reached a hand to me; I was to be forgiven. She took my chin between strong fingers—no softness now—and looked long and hard into my eyes. I made myself stand without shrinking, trembling with pleasure at her silken touch. When I looked into her dark eyes, I prayed for her to understand, forgive. To love me again.

"You will go," she said at length.

I started to make reverence. "Yes, my lady." She stopped me with her hand on my shoulder.

"Do you understand? You will leave the Lake House. Today. And you will never return unless I bid it."

The light in the room receded, darkness surrounded the burning whiteness of the Lady's face, her fierce eyes watching me. When I tried to shake my head, the weight of the gesture carried me to the floor; I fainted, still unbelieving.

I woke in the company of one of the lay sisters, a thin, pinched-looking girl with worried eyes and an impossible number of freckles. She said her name was Malla; her accent was heavily Breton. As my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I realized we were not in my cell; this was a small damp room with the smell of rotting silage. A room over the stables, kept to accommodate the groomsman of visitors.

“Madam Abbess said you was to rest here until you was fit to travel.” The girl drew away from me as she said it, as if she feared a blow. “I’m to take you out of Britain. There’s your horse, and a donkey for me below. And she give me this for you.” She held a purse out to me. I opened it wide enough to see a sparkle of gold, then drew the string tight again. “Madam said it’s your dowry, mistress. Soon’s you feel up to travel—”

“No. I have to talk to her.” I pushed myself upright and fought my dizziness.

The girl shook her head. “Can’t, mistress. You’ll not be given entrance. They gave us some food, if you’re hungry.” She nodded at the saddlebag filled to bursting and left sitting by the door. “Are you hungry, mistress?” she asked hopefully.

“No.”

“Then I s’pose we’d ought to start away,” she said sadly. I let her raise me to my feet and dress me like a child. She tucked a cloak around my shoulders and pinned it with a silver brooch old Merlin had given me. While I sat, unseeing, Malla dragged the heavy saddlebag downstairs and slung it onto her donkey; my horse already bore a chest with my few possessions in it. Then she returned for me, saw me mounted, and clambered onto her donkey’s back. She took the rein of my horse and led me from the House yard, past Sister Eilon at the gate, into unpromising dusk.

The girl kept up a stream of comfortable chatter as we rode. I heard none of it until she asked if I was a good sea traveler.

“Sea travel? What are you talking about?”

“My home, mistress. Brittany, where my folk are. And kinder folk than you find in your Britain.” She made a scornful sound of it: Breee-t’n. “My

old Aunt Landra'd take us in. But be a good sea traveler?"

I was not. The voyage from the seaport of Clausentium to the Breton coast was one long gray misery. I listened to Malla rejoice at being so nearly home; I could not share her joy. My home was behind me, across the sea, a place wrapped about a person; that any other place could become home I doubted.

Malla's aunt lived in Rugonde, a village of a dozen cottages, close set in the Breton forest. The forest, called Broceliande, had a presence of its own; at night in Landra's tiny cottage the deep green fastness seemed to embrace the village; I remembered that Merlin often spoke of Brittany as a place of strong magics. Old Landra, fat and tooth-shy, took us in without question. I was let to sit in the sun or by the fire, healing my hurt. By and by, the ache in me gentled to a thin grey longing, a pale film that stretched across my thoughts until I no longer noticed it.

Still, it took a fever that swept Rugonde and would have killed a dozen or more, to pull me from my fog. Watching folk sicken around me, *willow bark and strawberry-leaf*, I thought. *Don't they know?* It seemed they did not, and I spent hours in forest and field searching for flowers, leaves and bark, and more hours decocting a tisane to take the fever away. When the sickness had gone, I had found my occupation making tinctures and cerates, dispensing medicines and learning to read sickness in the eyes of the folk who came to me.

I had cause to bless Merlin's lessons. So many of them had seemed trivial, a mixture of nonsense—cats slaughtered to cure warts, salt cast over the shoulder to avert ill luck—and cookbook magic. Now I recalled his healing spells and recipes, and cures learned in the stillroom from my Lady. I had believed myself an indifferent student, trying no harder in my studies than would please her. Now I had reason to remember and to learn anew.

So I earned my keep; when I cured the baron's son of the lung-flux, I was granted a small draughty stone villa in payment, and brought Landra from her mud-and-wattle cottage to cook and see to me. I delivered babies, closed the eyes of those I could not save, learned the franker speech of country folk, forgot in some measure my convent-bred niceness. Malla was

betrothed, then wed, to Rugonde's miller; a year later, I was both midwife and godmother to her girl child.

I could have forgotten—almost—that there was another world outside the green shadows of Broceliande, but from time to time strangers rode through the town. I cared less for their tidings than for the pleasure of hearing different tongues, Latin or British. Often I invited these strangers to my hall to dine and tell me their gossip, and I smiled and poured more wine when they toasted me, the gracious lady of Rugonde.

One traveler, Pelles, was of Arthur's court and returning from a mission to Rome. Having sped across the continent on the King's business, he undertook now a more leisurely return for his own pleasure. I thought him very young, fair and open and just a little brash, but he was three years my senior and a veteran—to hear him talk—of several hair-raising campaigns in Arthur's service.

I liked him. The first night that he dined with me, I laughed often. The second night, I barely noticed what I ate, so deep were we in talking. By the third night, I looked for his coming and would have been disappointed to take my meat with only Landra for company. Pelles reminded me that I had been accounted pretty; listening to his tales, the nonsense he could spout with gorgeous ease, I remembered Camelot.

"I was there," I told him. "In Camelot. It seems a long time ago."

"No, surely I'd remember a woman so beautiful and so charming—"

"Truly, among so many?" I teased. "I was there for a year. *You* must have been off on one of your quests."

He gave me a look full of heart and laughter. I remembered seeing men and women carrying on such dalliance in Camelot; I had scorned it then and never realized its airy pleasure.

Three more evenings he dined with me. We laughed and exchanged stories; he urged me more than once to come to Camelot with him.

"Astound them! Let them remember how fair you are, how talented, how gracious." He waved his arms in exaggerated circles and grinned. On the storming night when he made his farewell, I was sorry to see him go. We

screamed our good-byes over the thunder and watched as lightning shadows made a giant of the stone lintel over the courtyard gate.

“Visit again and bring me stories of your heroism,” I yelled.

He took my hand and pressed it against his heart. “Come back with me,” he yelled back. “Come back...” He hesitated. “With me.”

After a moment, I pulled my hand away. It was cold outside his grasp. “My place is here. They need me.” *I can never return.* “Go safely.”

Rain plastered his fair hair to his skull and water ran off the corner of his smile. He stayed a moment longer, told me to go in before I was as wet as he. So I turned back to my fire. I was pouring more wine when I heard it happen: thunder, the screams of the horse, the grate of stone.

I ran for the courtyard and saw him: his horse had shied in the lightning and brought the wall down. Pelles was pinned under the lintel stone.

Through a haze of panic and anger, I reached into the heart of the stone lintel, pulled up and twisted away, only half knowing what I did. As I ran stumbling across the rain-slick yard, the lintel rose, obedient to my command, up and off Pelles’s body. He was free before Landra and I reached him.

Pelles made a slow convalescence. He charmed old Landra, who scolded and fussed and was entirely under his thumb; with me he was more respectful—a little. I spent some part of the day and each evening with him, dicing or reading, talking. I did my work, gathered and dried herbs, pressed out oils, mixed liniments and powders, prescribed for the sick and hurt who came to me. But I had found a new study, as intoxicating as love or honey wine: Merlin would have recognized it.

I thought often of Merlin, knowing I had missed the heart of his teachings. What I had scorned as an old man’s prosing were his greatest secrets, tricks he had learned over many years to discipline and develop the great natural ability that was his. What I had dismissed as flattery I realized now was truth: the old man had recognized a power in me that even my Lady had not seen.

I struggled to learn the limits of my powers (and it was a struggle, all experiment and failure, no demure learning from scrolls or parchments),

spent hours in the woods straining to do simple things without the fuel of panic, doing them easily once I achieved the proper degree of nonchalance. On the day I learned that knack, I went from shifting pebbles to moving rocks, made the trees dance to my will, drew the clouds together in a great frowning congregation. While rain poured down on me, I stood on the hilltop and laughed like a zany, filled with triumph.

Sometimes the learning hurt: I discovered inadvertently that the touch of the Lady's hand, which I had prized as a sign of especial tenderness was, as well, a way of compelling truth or loyalty. The shadow memory of her hand cradling my chin still made me flush with longing, despite the distance of time and miles. Even the power in me seemed powerless to stop that pain.

Learning so preoccupied me that when Pelles told me it was time that he returned to Camelot, I was surprised (that the time had passed so quickly) and saddened (that he would go) and worrying over a beldame's recipe for dream-reading.

"Will you miss me?" he asked, playing with my fingers like a Christian telling rosary beads.

"Rugonde will be very quiet without you," I admitted. *Storax, benjamin, labdanum and oil of lavender and...what else?* "You'll be happy to be back in the city, I suppose."

"Nimüe?"

Camphire and damaske with civet. All together, as a kind of incense.

"Yes?" I pulled my attention back to him. He looked well now, only a scar on his brow as token of his fall; his fair hair almost covered it.

"Will you *think* of coming to Camelot? You'd be welcome, more than welcome, I promise it." He was very earnest. It made my heart sink.

"I cannot. I'm sorry, Pelles." What there was for me in Britain I could not approach; what he wanted I did not know how to give. "Come visit me again," I offered, knowing it was a cool comfort.

He refused to be comforted. "I'll leave in the morning." He said it as if he expected the words to hurt and, curiously, they did. He rose and left the room, very straight-backed with his anger, gone before I could say again, "I'm sorry." He never heard the words.

In the morning he kissed Landra's fat cheek and swore undying love to her; he and I bid a quiet farewell. Anger had passed through us both. Landra and I stood in my small courtyard and watched as Pelles rode away. Then Landra gave a prodigious sigh and went in to her spinning.

Broceliande's shadows closed behind Pelles, sealing Rugonde safely away from the world. I was busy with my work in the infirmary, with household chores in which I was Landra's fumble-fingered student. And my studies. There was no goal to the learning, as magic such as mine was rarely called for in the Brittany forest, but I studied the shifting of rocks and trees, the management of clouds and human moods; I searched for words that would unlock the past and let me read what had happened in Merlin's cave that day. Curiously, I never thought to read the future.

oOo

And now the future was upon me, here in the courtyard of my villa.

"Nimüe?" The lady waited for my reply. Dizzily, I tried to think of something to say. Three years since Pelles rode from my courtyard; seven since I set out from the Lake House. *Why now? Why come now, after all these years?* I was a woman grown and still I could only stand staring at the Lady, wanting to touch her hand, listen to her voice, be her beloved. Finally, I managed: "My lady, will you take some wine?"

"Thank you, I will." She ignored her groom and allowed Pelles to lift her down from her horse. His hand lingered at her waist and I was taken with a jealousy so sharp and fierce I almost cried out. She held his eyes with hers for a long moment, then drew one finger casually along his jaw. Words came to my lips that would have torn Pelles from her side—torn him to pieces—but the habit of discipline was strong; some part of me still thought of him as friend. I turned on my heel to lead them to the hall.

"Pelles told me such things of you, I had to see myself." She sat on a chair of carved wood just beyond the window; rosy afternoon light touched the embroidered hem of her robe. She no longer dressed as soberly as she had at the Lake House; the privilege of Camelot draped about her shoulders

in embroidered linen and fine wool. “Sit down, dear girl. Tell me what became of you after you left us.”

After you left us. She made it sound as if the exile had been my own choice. Pelles paced the length of the wall, his eyes always on her. “There is little to tell, Lady; I came here; I’ve been the healer since Malla and I arrived; you’ll remember Malla, Lady; the girl you sent with me.”

She nodded vaguely. “You’re too modest, Nimüe. A country healer does not have a villa like this, or a reputation such as yours. In the villages all up the coast you’re mentioned with considerable respect. You’re hardly a village herb-grannie.”

I watched her lips form the words but barely heard, marveling at the soft rose of her mouth, wanting to trace its shape with my fingers, my own lips.

Pelles laughed behind me, a forced sound that begged for notice. “I told you, Lady Viviene, her powers—”

“You did, sir.” She cut him off. Despite myself I felt a gleam of vindictive pleasure: *see there, she does not love you.* “Nimüe, I am tired after our journey. Is there a chamber...”

At once I was on my feet, calling for Landra, who had gone off to clear my room for the Lady and to ready two smaller rooms for Pelles and myself. “I’ll take you there at once. Will you sup later with me? Us?” I added, feeling Pelles’s hot look on my shoulder blades.

“Of course. Pelles, see that my groom and horse are taken care of.” She did not wait to see him nod; she was gone.

I paused a second before I followed her. “Pelles...”

He looked at me. For the first time since their arrival, he and I really saw each other, looked square and openly at each other. There was no softness in him for me now. “Yes, Lady?”

“You’re welcome back.” It was all I could say. My heart urged warfare, promising a battle for the Lady’s least word. Common sense and the hard-won discipline of my studies reminded me again that he was, or had been, my friend. When he nodded grimly, I understood that his heart and mind were no less divided than mine. “At supper, then.”

The torches were lit when the three of us met in the hall. Lady Vivienne wore a tunic of garnet red wool, finely embroidered; it made her cool black-and-white beauty the more stirring for the reflection of rose in her cheeks. I ached to touch her, but knew better than to show my feelings too plainly. Pelles obviously did not know her as well: he followed her movement through the room, besotted.

It was a strange meal. The Lady spoke, and Pelles and I at either hand restrained ourselves from quibbling too obviously for her attention. She asked me what I had done before coming to Rugonde, what great folk I had met in Brittany. I was embarrassed to admit how little I knew outside of Broceliande, and how little I remembered of my first months in Brittany; she took my protestations with a sort of smiling disbelief. “Keep your council if you will, child.” She and Pelles spoke of Camelot while I picked at my food and watched the radiant flesh of her throat rise and fall with her breath.

“A toast.” The Lady poured honeyed wine into my cup; her eyes met mine. “And Pelles?” She poured for him, then herself. “To old friends re-met.”

We drank. The wine was too sweet for my taste, cloying; I was used to taking it nearly unsweetened. Still, I met her eyes over the brim of my cup and smiled; she returned the smile and drank to me.

Then she rose, shimmering in the firelight, bade us both goodnight, and was gone. We sat dumbfounded for a moment, then Pelles smiled; not the beaming of an infatuated boy but a rueful man’s smile. “So are we dismissed,” he said.

“It would seem so. More wine?”

He refused the wine, but sat a while longer. It was companionable, that sitting, shared bemusement between us.

“Pelles, what brought you here?” I asked at length.

“It is just as she said. When I returned to Camelot I spoke of you—often. They called it boasting, Pelles’s questing tale. But Lady Vivienne heard and believed me when I told her how you saved my life. I did not know until she made up her mind to visit Brittany that she had known you as a child.”

I thought of our last parting. “Yes. Years ago.” *And now she is here.* I still could not compass it. In a wondering mood, I bade him good night at last and retired to the room Landra had made ready for me.

In the night, I woke from a nightmare, fought my way back to waking to find I had not dreamt all of it; there was a fire in my throat and belly, a tearing that every breath made worse. My heart beat too fast, my vision was blurred. It was very hard to do what I knew I must: compose my mind to read my body and seek out the sickness. That isolated, I reached, muttering the incantations between gritted teeth, into myself, soothing the burning tissues, finding the toxins and changing them into a syrup as harmless as water, to flow through blood and flesh without damage.

When I could stand, I dressed myself and went to her room.

It seemed she was waiting for me; she was still dressed in her dinner finery, sipping wine by the fire. “Come in, dear child,” Vivienne said. “You look pale. Some wine?”

“To try the same trick again, my lady?”

She did not seem dismayed. “That was a most potent poison; your masters would be proud of you.” Her smile invited me closer. I found, to my horror, that I wanted her still; had she reached for me, I would have gone to her embrace, not trustingly, but helpless to resist.

“Why?” I asked, distantly pleased that my voice had not broken.

“What else could I do? I sent you away once, I could not banish you from banishment. And sooner or later, you would tire of this retreat...” She waved a hand dismissively, as if to make my home, the village, all of Brittany small and insignificant. “You would come and challenge me. I could not risk that. While my reports said that you were ignorant of your power, I could let be, but when that boy told me what you had done here in the wilderness, I knew it was past time. Whoever your masters are, sooner or later they would demand you leave—”

“I have no master!” I cried. “Not since you sent me away from the Lake House. I’ve taught myself what I needed for the love of it, using what I had learned from you and from Lord Merlin.”

“An old fool who knew better than to be killed by a stupid girl with a spark of ability?” Her mouth curled. “He deserved his death.”

I looked at her and saw what I had never understood: “You feared him. He was stronger than you and you were afraid of him. You wanted his power.”

She looked at me as if I were telling a children’s tale. “Of course I did. Just as you would come to want mine if I let you.” Her voice was all reason. “So I cannot let you.”

She raised one slender hand to gesture. I reached, and grasped her hand to stop her, the first time I had ever touched her without permission. It brought us face to face, her dark eyes glittered down at me from her greater height, her mouth was pressed tight. For all her slenderness, Vivienne was strong, her will steely. I kept my grasp on her wrist and tried to break her cool stare with my own gaze.

And she was still so beautiful. *How can I know this evil and still want her? How can I know what I know and love her?* Gradually her resistance died; our hands dropped and we faced each other.

“Oh, Nimüe...” A very small voice, tired and sad. She was panting slightly. So was I; my hand trembled at the release of tension. When she raised her hand to cup my chin, I leaned into the palm, the gesture as natural as breathing. With that gesture and for the first time in seven years, I was *home*. Pleasure made my bones as soft as honey; there was a honey taste in my mouth. If she had asked me for my life in that moment, I would have given it to her.

I raised my eyes to her face, inches above mine, near enough to kiss. Her mouth was curved in the tenderest smile; her wide brow creased just slightly as she read my face. Her dark eyes, fathomless, dancing with the firelight, were filled with love. And pleasure. And triumph, an ugly reckoning triumph which counted every minor capitulation and treasured it.

I pulled away from Vivienne’s hand. “I know the trick of touch, Lady. I’m proof against it.”

She smiled wolfishly, the tenderness gone. “You never have been.”

I felt tears start with anger. “I have *always* been. I loved you, that was what that touch was to me. Not power, love. You could have kept me, here or at the Lake House years ago, docile and biddable as you wished. I’d never have risen against you.”

“It must have come to war soon or late. Look, child...” I looked into the fire as she bade me, and in the flames saw old Merlin in his cave. He stood, bowed and feeble, beneath the rain of stone that I had loosed, paralyzed with grief and unable to save himself. Watching the image licked by flame, I knew that he had died rather than strike me down. He had loved me.

Hot grief seized me, fed upon itself. I stood weeping, staring into the fire, blinded by my vision and hating the stupid callow girl who had killed that old man. And then I remembered why the child had been there, who had sent her. I pulled my gaze from the fire and shook my head, forcing a smile.

“You use the wrong argument, Vivienne,” I told her. I looked at the flask and cup from which she had been drinking, planted a thought in her. “You are too used to folk who cannot fight back.” She followed my glance and her white skin paled, glowing with her sudden terror in the firelight. She raised a hand to her throat.

“What have you done,” she whispered. I imagined what she would feel: the tightness, the burning, the conclusion. “You’ve not been near my cup,” she protested. “And I’m proof against poison. Do you think I’d not protect myself against any potion I’d use myself?” She rang out triumphant again.

“It’s not *your* potion, Vivienne.” I let my mind reach hers, let her feel the slow constriction, touched her heart and set it racing. The fire in her belly, the sickly-sweet taste of honeyed wine in her mouth, and fear rich and hot in her blood. I poisoned her with rage. “It’s mine.”

She staggered back with her hand at her mouth. “Nimüe!”

“Do you like this war of your own making?” One final twist, one last cold clutch, and I drew back from her. Released, she shuddered and fell backward, knocking over a small table. While she caught her breath and tried to right a spinning world, I made myself wait, letting the enormous hurt run out of me. “I don’t want to hurt you,” I said at last.

She stood against the wall, one hand at her side, the garnet-colored tunic hanging askew. Her dark hair unraveled from its plait and her face was tense and narrow. “I’ll destroy you. You cannot stand against me.”

Certainty blossomed in me when I looked into her eyes: she was right. I looked at my hands and saw the bones of a child. I was frail, the very draughts of the chamber buffeted me. I was not a woman safe in the serenity of her life and her power, but a girl, pretty and callow and unlearned, as naïve as an infant, afraid of the world of men. I was breathless with terror, knowing that all that kept that girl—me—safe was the Lady’s protection. Without that I was helpless; fighting her would be madness.

Dimly, I watched Pelles enter the room and go to her side, his face all concern, come to a wordless summoning. She smiled a smile of near-concealed suffering; her fingers caressed his cheek affectionately. I wanted to tear his heart out and I could not move.

“N-nn-no!” I stuttered. Pelles turned and saw me: a madwoman gasping and weeping. Vivienne whispered something to Pelles, who held her protectively, slightly behind him. My eyes met his—dim and sleepy, bespelled by Vivienne’s light, caressing touch—and I was distracted from her spell, returned to myself. I stood still for a moment and let strength course through me.

Pelles spoke: “Nimüe, lady, think what you do.”

I answered him from a cool dim place of power. “I know what I do; Pelles, she thrust this upon me. I never wanted to hurt her. I loved her.”

“Would you destroy her because she cannot return your love?” *Was that the lie she had told?* “Think who she is, what she is; Nimüe, what’s love to the ones that are the stuff of legends?”

I thought again of Merlin. “No more than food or drink or air to breathe,” I told him. “To those that *are* the stuff of legends. Did she tell you she was such a one?”

He looked at me and shook his head dizzily. “Nimüe—”

“Kill her,” the Lady said. “She’ll destroy me—kill her, Pelles.” Her hand went again to his throat, but the caress was desperate this time, her fingers poised like talons.

“Will you kill me, Pelles? It’s what she brought you to do,” I said levelly. The truth was twisted in her face. “Kill me...and she will kill you, soon or late. Am I wrong, Lady?”

Her hand worked at his cheek, feverish. “What does it matter? You, him, that slobbering old mage—I have a right to destroy what is a danger to me. Or what I have no use for. Now, Pelles. Kill her for me.” Behind the dimness in his eyes there was a hopeless spark of rage, and I knew I must help him.

I froze him where he was and watched Vivienne as she realized she stroked stone, not flesh. Pelles gazed unblinkingly at me, standing like a warrior facing death.

She screeched something, wrenched the dagger from Pelles’s sash, and flew at me, her face furious as a hawk’s. If I stopped her now she would try again and again, knowing no other way. She raised the dagger above her head to strike me.

I reached for her and grasped her heart with my mind and twisted, crushing, feeling the flesh tear. There was no pleasure in it. It took only a moment; there was hardly time for her look of surprise before the Lady dropped the dagger. Her eyes filled with blackness and she fell to the floor.

Afterward I sat and wept for a long time. Pelles, freed from her spell and from mine, held me, and he wept too.

In the morning, Landra wrapped the Lady’s body in white damask and saw that a carter was found to take the body from my house to the seaside, the first leg of its return to the Lake House. We stood in the courtyard, watching as the wagon pulled away and rolled haltingly over the rutted path until it was swallowed by the dappled shadows of the road. Grief stuck in my throat; I had wept all my tears before dawn, for all of us.

“Let them bury her,” Pelles said coldly. Freed of the Lady’s spell he was angry, ashamed of his infatuation.

Two survivors, still raw, sharing. “You’ll go back to Camelot?”

He nodded. “You’ll stay here?”

“I don’t know.” My exile was over. “This place tastes of ashes.”

“Come to Camelot,” Pelles urged again, a ghost of another urging. “With me.”

I was afraid to promise too much; the leaves were tending to golds and russets and soon it would be no weather for traveling. “Perhaps I will,” I said. “Not now, but soon.”

o0o

I returned to Britain. It looks much the same as I remember, but the open spring countryside seems strange after Broceliande’s green confines. The blossoming orchard before Merlin’s hill turns its face up to the sun. I came here to study the old man’s grave, the rock-filled adit hidden now by young trees and gorse, but there are no secrets revealed in the stone I broke. Like one waking from a dream, I shrug myself free from the past and mount my horse. Then, hopeful, I turn her west, toward Camelot.

Ricky Cowlicky

Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

“Oh my!” the nurse said, and Mrs. Corlicky glanced down sharply toward the end of the birthing bed, afraid there was something amiss with her newborn son.

The nurse gave her a fluttery smile. “He’s such a...a...cute little thing.”

But there was no hospital in Chicago—perhaps none on the planet—in which Richard Reuben Corlicky the Third was a cute little thing, and his parents knew it the moment they saw him. It didn’t alter their love for him. He was such a good baby—sweet and patient and with a sunny disposition. He smiled early and often, and even the doctor was amazed by how aware the infant boy seemed of his surroundings.

This served to ameliorate the scene at his *bris* when he was unveiled to his extended relations. All were dumbstruck except his Baba Lubliya (also known as Loony Lubi), who exclaimed, “*Bozhek moy!* That’s the ugliest baby I’ve ever seen!”

You could have heard a mouse sneeze as Baba Lubliya leaned her massive bulk forward in her chair with a great creaking of leather and added, “He looks like one of those troll dolls.”

And so Richard Reuben Corlicky III received his first nickname. It would not be his last.

o0o

In the same Chicago Hospital at almost the same moment Richard Reuben Corlicky III came into the world, twin girls were born to Mr. And Mrs. Alexei Sawicki, who—charmed by non-Slavic syllables—named their daughters Diana and Deanna.

The nursing staff universally agreed that Deanna was the most beautiful baby they had ever seen. About Diana they said variously: “She’s very quiet.” “Such an easy baby!” “She has a lovely disposition.”

But at the girls’ *brit bat*, their great Aunt Katarzyna (sometimes called Crazy Katya) observed that if Dee was first in line for beauty, then Di was surely last.

“How those girls came into the world from the same womb at the same time is one of God’s mysterious jokes,” she added.

This did not stop their parents from loving both girls, of course. For Diana was as smart as she was homely—quick to talk and walk, and with winning ways. Her sister, meanwhile, was as graceless as she was beautiful—clumsy, slow, and unintentionally rude. Friends of the family admired Dee until she opened her mouth and pitied Di until she opened hers, which she often did in defense of her sibling.

By the time the girls started school, they had nicknames of their own. Di was called ‘Why’ because of her precocious and curious nature. Dee they nicknamed ‘Duh.’

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Ricky “Troll” Corlicky first laid eyes on Deanna Sawicki in Miss Tupelov’s first grade class. It was love at first sight for the bright, buck-toothed boy with the Coke-bottle lenses. He worshipped the ethereally beautiful, quiet girl who sat, angel-radiant and golden, in a shaft of sunlight that seemed to follow her wherever she went.

“She’s so quiet!” Ricky murmured, staring at her across the lunchroom.

A classmate seated at his table heard him—a freckle-faced redhead named Seymour Getz.

“Who?” Seymour asked, following Ricky’s eyes. “Oh, you mean Duh!”

“Duh? Why do you call her that?”

Seymour grinned. “C’mon. You’ll see.”

He led Ricky to Deanna’s table where she sat with a girl so homely, Ricky felt immediate empathy. The Beauty looked at the boys with soft, doe-like eyes the color of spring. They matched her blouse.

“Hi, Di. Hi, Duh,” Seymour said.

“Don’t call her that,” said Di, her pallid face turning a mottled red that did nothing to enhance her looks. “She can’t help it.”

Help what? cried Ricky’s soft heart.

“Ricky Cowlicky wants to know why we call you ‘Duh,’ Duh,” said Seymour.

But the lovely girl seemed not to have heard him. She had focused her great, perfect, hazel eyes upon Ricky.

His heart stopped in his breast, his breath stilled in his throat. Unconscious of the action, he pushed his glasses further up his hawk-beak nose and waited with a sense of moment.

Her perfect, rose-petal lips opened and she said, “Your hair is funny,” in a voice as dull and heavy as a leaden bell.

Blushing, he put his hand to the peculiar tuft of almost white hair that had earned him his most popular nickname.

“It’s called a ‘cowlick,’ he said.

“Why?”

Seymour answered for him. “‘Cause it looks like a cow licked it! Why else? Hey, Duh. What’s the first letter of the ABCs?”

The lovely eyes moved to Seymour’s face, and the perfect little chin quivered. “Don’t know.”

“It’s A, Duh! That’s why they’re called the ABCs!”

Now the girl’s outraged companion came to her feet, upsetting her chair. “Stop it!” she said, and looked at Ricky with eyes as shrewd as they were nondescript. “I thought you were a nice boy, Richard Reuben Corlicky. Apparently I was mistaken.”

Scalded, Ricky turned and fled. Seymour followed, taunting him: “Ricky Cowlicky’s in lo-ove! Why don’t you marry her, Troll? Then you’ll be Ricky Sawicki-Cowlicky!”

“I will marry her,” Ricky promised himself. “I will.”

Ricky was amazed to discover that Dee and Di were twins. The two could not have been more dissimilar. Where Deanna was fair and vivid, with curly titian hair and a peaches-and-cream complexion over perfect features, Diana was pallid and washed out, with limp, dunnish hair and eyes to match. Like Ricky, she wore thick-lensed, wire-rimmed glasses and had braces on her teeth. In her case, these were on her lower teeth to correct an aggressive underbite that made her look like nothing so much as a pit bull with a beak.

Ricky did not interact with either of the Sawicki girls for the rest of the year, and it was not until the middle of their first year of junior high school that he apologized for his behavior at their initial meeting. The apology was occasioned by his being yoked with Dee and Di for a science project.

“I owe you an apology,” he said during a pause in their first study session. They sat in the living room of his house, and Ricky—always a considerate host—had provided milk and cookies while they discussed their project.

The discussion was rather lopsided, for Dee rarely spoke. Di provided commentary for her: “Dee thinks this” and “Dee says that.” Ricky doubted Dee had expressed any of the thoughts attributed to her, but he appreciated her sister’s attempts to include her in the conversation.

“An apology?” Di repeated, settling her glasses on the sharp bridge of her over-sized nose. “Whatever for?”

“When we were first introduced back in the first grade, I was cruel to Deanna.” He turned his attention to the lovely girl, who gazed back with bovine bemusement. “I didn’t mean to be. In fact, I can truthfully say that was the last thing in the world I meant to be. Seymour heard me comment on how quiet you were.” He blushed a little and added, “It made me think of the beautiful Princess Lisa in the story of the Swan Princes. Of course, I quite realize you weren’t mute, only shy.”

Dee glanced sideways at her sister and shrugged, an act that somehow occasioned her hand to fly out and spill the glass of milk Ricky had poured for her. She leapt up, knocking over her chair, which in turn hit a small

three-legged Queen Anne table that toppled, sending an antique vase to the floor, where it shattered into very tiny pieces.

Deanna stood staring dully as the milk soaked into the pages of her binder and dripped onto the Corlicky's Persian carpet.

Ricky was momentarily paralyzed by the perfect choreography of the disaster. Then he gathered his wits and ran for paper towels. He and Di cleaned up the mess, all the while assuring Dee that it was quite all right—the carpet would be as good as new. Ricky added that the vase was already cracked and couldn't have been expected to last much longer. He didn't mention that it had been cracked since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Ricky went to the kitchen to rid himself of the sodden paper towels. When he returned to the parlor some minutes later, he found Di discoursing with his mother and grandmother, while her twin perched awkwardly in the corner of the sofa.

Diana was in the midst of an animated description of their science project, stating it in terms so simple and elegant that Ricky's mother was nodding and asking questions her son realized were more curious than merely polite. And the more Di shone, the further Dee sank into the sofa under the frankly curious gaze of Baba Lubliya.

Ricky took a deep breath and hurried into the room, causing Diana to pause in her recitation.

In the moment of silence before Ricky could say, "Hi, mom. I'm sorry about Aunt Esther's vase," Baba Lubliya asked Deanna, "What's the matter, *maidel*? Cat got your tongue?"

Deanna glanced about the room. "Huh? There's no cat."

"Ah, so you do speak!"

"When I have to."

Baba Lubliya's eyebrows rose toward her graying hair. "Well, you're a strange girl."

"Well, you're a strange old lady," countered Dee.

"Oh!" exclaimed Ricky's mother.

Baba Lubliya sat back in her chair, making it groan. "Am I?"

Di tried to intervene. “Oh goodness, Mrs. Corlicky—Dee didn’t mean that. She’s just....”

“I meant it,” said Dee, her eyes still on Ricky’s grandmother. “You’re a weird old woman. You’re just like my Aunt Katya. Except she’s not fat. She’s a witch. I bet you’re a witch, too.”

Ricky was aghast; Diana was speechless; Mama Corlicky was appalled; and Deanna withdrew back into the sofa.

Baba Lubliya laughed until tears streamed down her round, apple-cheeked face.

o0o

“That Deanna Sawicki is such a rude girl,” said Ricky’s mother when the twins had gone. “Such a waste of good looks. It’s hard to believe she and that charming Diana are sisters. If she had even half her sister’s wits, she’d be tolerable, but as she is...she’ll be long at home, that one.”

And with that long-winded commentary she bustled to the kitchen to prepare dinner, leaving Ricky alone with his grandmother.

“I am, you know,” the old woman said.

Ricky, startled from his troubled musings, turned to look at her.

She smiled at him—her secret smile. The one she used when she gave him treats he wasn’t supposed to have.

“A witch. A *gadalka*. Just like the girl said. She’s not so dull she can’t see that. And I’m not so dull I can’t see how you pine for her, *boychik*.”

Ricky was suddenly miserable on both Dee’s account and his own. “We’re a matched set. People tease me because I’m ugly and geeky; they tease her because she’s simple-minded and graceless. Even her beauty can’t make up for that.”

“Except in your eyes, eh?” Baba guessed. She leaned forward in her chair until their noses were almost touching. “Let me tell you something, my *boychik*. Something your batty old Baba did for you at your bris. I gave you a Gift.”

“I know. The Torah with my name engraved in gold leaf.”

“No. That was so our rabbi would think I’d repented of my old ways. I gave you another Gift; something I’m pretty sure the rabbi would not approve. I set a spell on you, Ricky Reuben.”

Ricky was well-used to his grandmother’s eccentricity. He had lived with it all his life and accepted it—enjoyed it even. But he’d never heard her advance such a claim as this.

“A spell? What sort of spell?”

“To the beloved of your heart you may give the Gift of Smarts.”

He barely held his laughter in check. “The...what? I’ve never heard of that—the Gift of Smarts.”

“You can make one person you love as smart as you are.”

“How?”

“You just hold her hand and look into her eyes and think her smart.”

“No, I mean—how can you do that? That’s...well, it’s unscientific.”

“You sure?”

“Well...yes, actually. I am. Spells are superstition.”

“Are they? I see you praying in *shul*. Is prayer superstition?”

He’d never considered that. “Well, if there’s a God, then I suppose talking to Him is no more superstition than talking to you.”

Baba Lubliya shrugged her massive shoulders. “What’s a spell but a specific sort of prayer?”

Ricky smiled and shook his head. “That’s outside my area of expertise.”

“Well, it’s not outside mine. A spell is just a prayer with a point to it.”

“All right. I suppose. But why would God answer *that* prayer?”

“Because it was a Gift. A *bris* Gift. Now, I don’t tell you this lightly,” she added, tapping the back of his hand with one finger. “Use it wisely. Because it only works once.”

He smiled and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. “I love you, Baba. You make me laugh.”

She leaned back in her chair and fixed him with an arch look. “Ah, now you think I’m just being Loony Lubi. You wait. You’ll use the Gift. I know.”

High school was a peculiar sort of hell for Ricky Corlicky. He had friends; his amiable personality and native intelligence ensured that. But there were times when he could only distinguish friends from enemies by how they addressed him. His enemies called him Ricky Cowlicky; his friends called him Troll.

Some of his friends teased him nearly as much as his detractors, but stopped short of causing him any real pain. Moreover, they would flatten anyone who did. He was, he realized, rather like the Goose That Laid the Golden Egg. You could get one good meal out of the Goose, or an endless supply of eggs, which took the form of tutoring in weak subjects and the chance of scoring the Goose as a lab partner.

Ricky was especially pleased to have been befriended by one Darby Clinton, who needed much coaching in geometry. Darby might have taken some ribbing over his own unusual name and his thick Georgia drawl, were it not for his six-foot-two-inch frame and 200-plus pounds of muscular bulk.

Ricky found PE class enjoyable for the first time in his life because Darby was there to ensure that there were no wedgies, no hazing, and no impromptu cold showers. No one so much as mentioned Ricky's bony knees or pronounced Adam's apple, or the fish-belly white of his scrawny body.

Were it not for poor Deanna's plight, high school might have seemed idyllic to Ricky. Her torture never ceased, but it altered subtly and disturbingly with the beginning of their freshman year. Ricky's first awareness of this was one day toward the beginning of their junior year, when he chanced to hear Deanna's voice float up to him—if something so leaden could be said to float—from beneath a staircase he was descending.

"Have I seen what?" she asked in her characteristically flat tone.

There was a stifled masculine giggle and a hoarse whisper, to which Dee replied, "Sure I've seen a cock. That's just another word for rooster. My Aunt Katya has a rooster and a bunch of laying hens."

This pronouncement was followed by gales of male laughter while Dee asked “What’s so funny?” several times in succession.

Ricky reached the bottom of the stairs at a run just as a new voice said, “Oh, go on—show her!”

Ricky skidded into the below-stairs alcove just in time to find Deanna sandwiched between two junior boys. One of them, Jesse Warneke, was in the process of unzipping his fly.

“Come on, Dee,” Ricky said, “we’ll be late for class.”

“Aw, c’mon!” said Jesse. “I was just going to show her my rooster.” He and his buddy broke up laughing again, and Ricky hustled his beloved into the hall.

“Hey, Dee-dee,” called Jesse after them, “meet me after school and I’ll let you hold it!”

Incensed, Ricky turned back. “You stay away from her, Jesse Warneke.”

“Or what?” Jesse rose to his full height. It was not an impressive height, but it trumped Ricky’s by a good two inches.

“Or I’ll tell Mrs. Stapleton what you were doing.”

“Well, aren’t you the little tattletale? Run to the principal like a baby.”

“I have no reluctance to go to the proper authority if it’s necessary to protect Deanna from your inappropriate behavior.”

Jesse guffawed. “In-ap-pro-pri-ate behavior? How’s this for inappropriate?” He stepped toward Ricky, cocking his arm for a punch.

If Ricky hadn’t closed his eyes, he would have seen a long, brawny arm extend over his shoulder and an equally muscular hand clamp over Jesse’s fist. His ears, being open, heard, “I don’t think ya’ll wanna do that.”

Ricky opened his eyes and smiled up over his shoulder into Darby Clinton’s broad face, which wore an expression of dispassionate amusement.

Darby continued to hold Jesse’s fist as he imparted further instruction. “I wasn’t here when this started, so I don’ know what my friend Troll here was tellin’ ya’ll. But whatever it was, ya’ll better do it...or not. Whichever.”

Here he looked to Ricky, who said, “Not.”

“Not,” repeated Darby for emphasis.

He let go of Jesse's hand, turned, and saw Deanna standing there, trying to fade her vivid self into the beige walls.

Ricky knew he only imagined the sound of Darby's jaw hitting the floor. "Come on, Deanna," he said quickly. "We really will be late for class. You too, Darby. You have English this period. Room 222. And thanks."

He took Deanna's arm and led her out into the cross corridor. Behind him, he thought he heard Darby's voice echo, "De-an-na-a," in the same awed tone his own heart always used.

"What did he mean?" Dee asked as they pattered up the half-empty hall toward their third period social studies class.

"Who?"

"The boy with the rooster in his pants. Why should I want to hold a rooster? I told him I'd seen one before." She was silent for a beat while Ricky tried to think of a response, then said, "I don't think he really had a rooster. How would it fit in his pants?"

Ricky had to stifle a laugh and nearly choked on the words, "They were just teasing you, Deanna."

"Oh."

He glanced at her as they slipped into the classroom, his heart nearly breaking at the expression on her face. He thought of Baba Lubliya and her spell and wished with all his heart it was real.

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The Rooster Episode was common knowledge before a week was out. Ricky spent the remainder of his high school tenure intercepting Rooster jokes before Deanna heard them. He and Di were both pleased to have an ally in this—Darby Clinton. The big lineman had taken a tumble for Dee and, after admiring her from afar for the better part of a year, he asked her to the senior prom.

Prom night, Ricky borrowed his mother's car, picked up Darby, then collected Di and Dee at their house, where Darby was subjected to the benevolent scrutiny of the twins' mother and father. Darby was on his best behavior.

Ricky and Di theorized that double-dating was the best way to keep an eye on Dee, whose flair for the unexpected put a certain strain on the evening. A strain to which both Darby and Dee were thankfully oblivious.

“Did you ever see that old movie, *Carrie*?” Di asked as she and Ricky followed the other couple up the red-carpeted hotel lobby to the rented ballroom.

“I read the novel,” Ricky replied, startled. “You aren’t suggesting Dee has some sort of...powers?”

Di shrugged, causing her wrap to fall from one bony shoulder. “They say our Aunt Katya’s a witch. Who knows?”

Ricky saw the glint of wry humor in her eyes and laughed. “That’s funny. My Baba Lubliya says she’s a witch. She said she gave me some sort of Gift.”

Di shook her head. “Apparently, all batty old Polish ladies say that.” She turned her gaze to the ballroom floor, already full of dancing couples.

“Well, here we go. Let’s try to keep them in sight.”

Ricky nodded, following her gaze. Darby had already led Dee to the dance floor. She tripped over her date’s feet and fell against him repeatedly. Darby didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he appeared to enjoy it.

Ricky bit his lip and wished it was his feet Deanna Sawicki was stepping on.

Ricky and Di were sitting on the sidelines, sipping cream sodas, when there was a great hue and cry near the refreshment bar. They had barely set down their drinks when they heard the strident tones of Deanna’s voice above the jangle and bustle of the room.

“Oh! My dress!”

“Wow, I’m sorry, Miss Sawicki,” crowed a reedy male voice. “Can I help you out of that wet old thing?”

The next sound they heard was the sort of unhappy cacophony that usually erupted through the swinging doors of restaurant kitchens.

Di and Ricky came unstuck and hurried to the knot of students clustered around the refreshments. It took some doing, but they were at last able to shove their way to the front, where they found Jesse Warneke struggling

groggily amid an explosion of shattered plates, cake, canapés, and punch. He wore an overturned bowl on his head and clumps of potato salad upon his person, and he was soaked with pink lemonade.

“What happened?” cried Diana. “Where’s my sister?”

A classmate named Alik, his eyes huge, his face caught between mirth and amazement, said “You should’ve seen! Jesse bumped into Dee at the punch bowl and spilled punch all down the front of her dress and you could like, see through it, but Jesse didn’t see Darby standing there, so he said something stupid about helping her out of her dress and Darby just picked him up and dumped him into the punch bowl, only he didn’t fit too well.” The recitation ended with a hiccupping laugh.

The sound was contagious. It swept the entire group of students, while Diana, fists clenched at her sides, demanded to know where her sister was now.

Alik regained control of his voice and pointed toward a rear exit. “I think Darby took her to the ladies’ room to clean up her dress.”

Di moved so quickly Ricky almost lost her in the crush of bodies straining to get a look at the unfortunate Jesse. There was a flash of light as someone snapped a picture.

Ricky caught up with Diana in the service corridor beyond the ballroom. It led to the kitchens on one end and to more ballrooms on the other. He paused to push his glasses further up his nose and glanced up and down the corridor.

Beside him, Di echoed the movement. “Let’s split up,” she said. “I’ll go left, you go right.”

He nodded and took off to the right, pausing to peek into side rooms as he went. He found a meeting of octogenarians, a *bat mitzvah*, and an anniversary party for a couple that reminded him of his own parents.

He was nearing the end of the corridor when he heard the flat nasal voice of his beloved proclaim, “You can just zip up your pants, Derby Whoever-you-are. I don’t want to see your damned old rooster!”

Ricky glanced about, seeking the source of the voice.

“My what?” Darby’s chuckle seemed to come from the very end of the corridor. “I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about, Dee. What’s a rooster got to do with anything? I just wanna show you how much I like you. I told you—I’d like us to go steady and this is what people who go steady do.”

Ricky rushed to the end of the hall, completely unsure what he would do when he got there. He wished fervently that Diana was with him; she’d be able to defuse the situation—probably without getting punched.

“No, it’s not,” bleated Deanna. “You’re making fun of me. Just like everybody else. You don’t like me. You just like laughing at me. Because I’m stupid. Ricky told me guys don’t have roosters in their pants. They’re—they’re too big and they—they peck!”

Ricky had reached the end of the hallway and found himself facing the closed door of a custodian’s closet. He might have missed it had he not overheard their voices, for it was tucked into an alcove.

Darby’s raucous laughter rolled from under the door. “Oh! I get it! Rooster!” The laughter cut off as if sucked up by a vacuum and Darby’s voice turned darkly sober. “Deanna, has someone else actually shown you his—”

Ricky pulled the door open and found them tucked in amongst the brooms and mops and floor buffers—Deanna pressed against a row of shelving on one side and Darby looming over her. She shivered in her punch-soaked dress, her perfect breasts clearly visible through the bodice.

Darby had thrown his dress jacket on the floor where he clearly intended they should do what steady couples do.

“Oh, there you are!” Ricky said lightly. “Di was getting worried. Poor Dee, you’re all wet. Let’s get you home and into some dry clothes.”

Darby opened his mouth, but said nothing. His beefy face was red as a rooster’s wattle. Deanna made a honking sound and ran into Ricky’s arms, crushing the sticky, wet fabric of her gown against his new suit. He hardly minded. She was warm and her brilliant hair smelled of mint.

Here it comes, Ricky thought, looking up into Darby’s flushed face. This is where I get socked from here to Wilmette.

But Darby hung his head and murmured “Sorry, Troll. You too, Deanna. It’s just....” He met Ricky’s eyes, looking as woebegone as Ricky had felt on and off since he’d first laid eyes on Deanna Sawicki. “She’s so beautiful and so sexy. I just lost it. And I thought....”

“You thought she’d be easy,” Ricky said with less heat than disappointment.

Darby merely nodded.

They rounded up Diana, and Ricky drove them home. The ride was silent and strained. Ricky dropped Darby at his place first, and it was not until he was gone that Diana asked what had happened.

Ricky lied. “They got lost trying to find a bathroom. All they found was a janitor’s closet. At least there were paper towels in there.”

Deanna now held a handful of those to the front of her dress. She looked at Ricky, but said nothing to contradict him.

He went inside with them, wanting to be sure Deanna was all right. Mrs. Sawicki invited him to have a cup of hot chocolate and some cookies while the girls went upstairs to change.

He was alone in their front parlor when Deanna appeared suddenly beside him, wearing a velour dressing gown that covered her from neck to toes. It was a rich shade of aubergine and made amethysts of her eyes. His heart flip-flopped in his chest like a beached fish.

“Are you all right, Deanna?” he asked.

“No,” she said heavily, fidgeting with the ribbons on the front of her robe. “I hate myself.”

He moved the porcelain mug to his left hand so Dee wouldn’t accidentally spill it on him, and put his right hand over hers. “Oh, Deanna, no! Someone as beautiful as you are should never, never hate themselves. It hurts me to see you so sad. I’d do anything to make you happy. Anything.”

She raised her eyes to his, almost stopping his heart altogether. “I wish I was smart like you and Di. I’d rather be as ugly as you are and smart than pretty and dumb as a post.”

Ricky ignored the innocent insult. “Now see? You really are clever. Only someone clever would have sense enough to know what they don’t know.

Truly stupid people don't realize they're stupid."

"You're just trying to make me feel better about being dumb. It won't work. I'm sick of being 'a dim bulb.' I try and try to learn things, and remember things, and not ruin things, but it's no use. I'm never going to be anything but a—a pretty dummy."

Now Ricky's heart did break. He heard it break. It sounded like the cracking of a delicate china cup.

"Oh, look," said Dee. "You busted mama's cup."

He looked. He'd squeezed the thing so hard a tiny fissure had run down one side. He got it to the saucer before it leaked onto Mrs. Sawicki's sofa, then took both of Deanna's hands in his own. He smiled brightly, falsely, and said "It's okay Deanna, I can fix that."

She looked dubiously at the cracked cup. "I don't know...."

"No, I mean this other thing. You being...slow. I can fix it."

"How?"

"My...my Baba gave me the Gift at my *bris*. I can make you as smart as I am. As smart as you are beautiful."

He told himself he believed it. He had to believe it for Deanna's sake, or at least make her believe it. Then he must pray that all she needed (for she really did seem clever in peculiar ways) was to believe in herself.

"Really?" she asked, her eyes showing dull interest.

"Really."

"You're not teasing me?"

"I would never do that to you, Deanna. I...I love you. I've loved you since first grade. And I have a crazy Polish grandmother who says she's a witch. You know how that is."

"My dad says Ciotka Katya is a witch," she said and looked him straight in the eye. "You've never teased me before. Or tried to look down my shirt or up my skirt."

"I would never," said Ricky, blushing because he'd thought about it.

"And you've never pretended to have something in your pants you have to show me."

He said nothing.

“So do it.”

He sweated. “Now, remember, my Baba says she gave me this Gift, but I’ve never tried to use it before.”

“Well, sure. If you’d used it, you wouldn’t have it anymore.”

Ricky had to bow to her strange logic. “Okay, but here’s the thing, Deanna. I told you I love you. I meant it. So if I do the spell and it works, will you promise me two things?”

“What?”

“One is to study very hard for finals with me and Di so you don’t get left behind. We’ve always done big projects together so you get the benefit of our grades. But you’ve got to pass finals on your own, Deanna. You’re going to have to concentrate.”

“I’ll be smart, so that’ll be easy.”

He squirmed. “The other thing is...will you promise to marry me after we graduate?”

“Huh?”

“Well, not right after. I figure it would be a good idea for me to get established in college first, but then...how about after my first year of college—I mean, after our first year of college. Will you marry me?”

“I guess that would be fair. If you fix me.”

“It would be fair, yes.”

“Okay. Do it. Make me smart.”

Ricky swallowed, tightened his grip on her hands, looked deep into her eyes, prayed Baba Lubliya really was a witch, and said “Be smart, Deanna Sawicki. Be as smart as I am. Be as smart as you are beautiful. I give you the Gift of Smarts.”

There was neither lightning nor thunder, nor the shimmering sound of wind chimes such as accompanies the casting of such spells in movies. Deanna merely blinked at him and said, “Okay. Ask me a question.”

o0o

“You know, it seems to me that what Poe meant about pursuing art for beauty’s sake is that you shouldn’t use artistic beauty as a weapon. Which,

if you indulge in didactics, you are, in essence, doing. A weapon is, by virtue of its purpose, not a thing of beauty. So if you use beauty as a weapon, it ceases to be beauty. Doesn't it?" Deanna Sawicki took a deep breath and fixed her English teacher with a direct and intense gaze.

He swallowed, riffled through the papers on his desk, glanced at the clock, and said, "I think that would be a marvelous topic for a paper, Deanna. Two pages by next Tuesday?"

Her classmates groaned and looked at her with mixed pity and astonishment. They had still not grown used to the things that now fell from Deanna Sawicki's perfect lips.

"I think the argument would be best delivered in a longer treatment, Mr. Callow. May I do six pages instead? I intend to quote extensively from Poe's Marginalia."

Now the astonishment was complete.

"Uh...by all means. Six pages it is. For extra credit."

The bell rang and the class dispersed like affrighted crows. All except for Deanna, who marched to Mr. Callow's desk, her lovely face wreathed in a smile guaranteed to cause the thirty-something teacher to time-travel to his own senior year.

"Thank you, Mr. Callow," she said. "I appreciate this opportunity to bring my grades up."

"You're welcome," he murmured after the classroom door had closed behind her. He shook his head and wondered if her family had put her on Prozac.

o0o

Jesse Warneke watched Deanna sail down the hallway, arms full of books, head high, smiling at all and sundry. He watched her disappear into the library. Before this week, he'd never seen her go through those doors. He wasn't even sure she could read.

"Hey, Cowlicky," he said, spying Ricky out of the corner of his eye.

Ricky stopped and regarded him neutrally.

"What's up with Deanna?"

“What do you mean?”

“How’d she get smart all of a sudden? The day before the prom she was as dumb as dirt. Monday morning she was....” He tapped his head.

“Maybe it was the shock of seeing you in potato salad and pink lemonade.”

“Oh, ha-ha. I’m serious. Did they put her on some kind of meds?”

Ricky glanced about as if for eavesdroppers, then leaned into Jesse and stage-whispered, “I’m really Harry Potter.”

“You’re what?” Jesse became peripherally aware that his tête-à-tête with the Uber-Geek was drawing a crowd.

“Well, not Harry Potter exactly, but—you know—a wizard. I cast a spell.” He twinkled his fingers in front of the other boy’s nose.

Jesse blinked and recoiled. The group around them laughed.

“I have to go,” said Ricky. “Study group.”

“You don’t believe that spell stuff, do you?” asked one of Jesse’s buddies when Ricky had gone.

“Hell no! Do I look like a dweeb?” Receiving no answer to that rhetorical query, Jesse brushed at the front of his t-shirt as if to rid himself of unseen pixie dust. “I don’t know what happened to Duh, but I liked her better dumb.”

o0o

Ricky shrugged his way through the library doors, juggling his over-stuffed pack. It was filled, not with text books, but with volumes on such subjects as psychology and history that he kept about for pleasure reading. The pack would be much lighter if he left them in his locker, but he hated the thought of having five spare minutes and nothing to read.

He raised his head and looked around for Dee and Di. Di was in the usual corner with their study group; Dee was nowhere in sight. He went to the table and set his pack down with a resounding thump.

“Where’s Dee?”

Diana looked up briefly from the book she was poring over and gestured with her head toward the stacks. “Forensic Psychology and Legal Ethics.”

She blew a wisp of limp hair from her forehead and returned to her studies, two pencils holding her bun in place, a third tucked behind one protruding ear.

Ricky noticed idly as he wandered off toward the Legal section that Di's braces had come off. Now her jaw looked slightly less determined.

He heard Dee's voice—her new, vivid voice—before he saw her.

"That's an interesting point of view," she was saying, "but one I'm not entirely comfortable with."

This was followed by a soft masculine chuckle. "You're not at all what I expected. I'd heard—"

"That I was a few raisins short of a *babka*?" she finished for him. "I got better."

"You sure did."

Quivering, Ricky turned the corner into the aisle. Deanna was there, leaning gracefully against the shelving while across from her a tall, blond youth, every bit as beautiful as she, gazed down at her in admiration. Neither saw Ricky, so he backed away and returned to his study group, pale and sweating.

Di gave him a quick glance as he sat down. "Find her?"

"Yeah. She might be late."

She wasn't late. She simply never showed. And for the remaining months of their senior year, she studied exclusively with Mr. Darrell Dwight, who shared her new fascination with the legal profession.

o0o

After graduation, Deanna took extended classes in pre-law to bring herself up to speed for college. Darrell laughed at her, but he couldn't understand how important it was to her to prove herself to those who had known her all her life. He had met her After.

She knew she had met her goal when her father promised her an associate position in his law firm upon her graduation from law school. Both girls had chosen the University of Chicago so they would be close to home. Her only disappointment was that Darrell would be attending Harvard.

Dee had had no end of suitors in the past year, but she was not a glutton. She had settled on Darrell without any conscious decision being made. They simply fit together.

He returned to Chicago at every opportunity, but the year had been emotionally blah. Deanna had gone back to her childhood habits and hung out with Diana and Ricky. They studied together, debated issues, attended synagogue, and chewed over old times at Starbucks.

It was there Dee went one afternoon in early April. It was a blustery day—which is to say normal for Chicago in spring—and Deanna felt wild and willful and electric. Especially so since Darrell would be coming home for spring break in two weeks.

She had seated herself at a corner table with a *venti* double mint latté, and pulled a paperback copy of *Gordon's Forensic Psychology* from her purse, when she overheard a familiar voice in a nearby booth.

"It's a miracle, that's what it is. That my boy should snag such a princess," said Mrs. Corlicky.

"Yeah, but she's dumb as a post, right? That's what I heard."

"Was. Not anymore. That's miracle number two. She suddenly develops a brain to go with beauty."

"Are you sure you got the right girl?"

"Ricky's been mad for her since grade school. And after senior prom he proposed and she said 'yes.' And she wasn't even his prom date! So, we're planning a wedding."

Dee had stopped tasting her latté. She had forgotten. She had actually forgotten her promise to Ricky. It had sloughed away a year earlier, along with her tongue-tangled stupidity.

Clutching her drink, she rose as discreetly as possible and made her way out of the café.

She called him that night, striving to sound casual, and invited him out for dinner. She chose a restaurant they frequented as a threesome—Ricky and her sister and she—so that he would associate it less with a proper date and romance and more with friendship and camaraderie.

They ordered, ate, and chatted about a world of different subjects, and Dee had to admit that were it not for his geeky exterior, Richard Reuben Corlicky III would be the perfect match for her. He was sweet, caring, witty, brilliant, funny, and he obviously adored her. In fact, she wished that Darrell would look at her that way....

She shook herself. Nonsense. She loved Ricky—as a friend, a brother. But, marry him...?

“Ricky,” she said as they pecked at their shared dessert, “you know how much I like you.”

“No, I don’t, actually,” he countered.

“Oh...well, I like you tremendously. In fact, I can honestly say that I love you. You’ve been my friend and even my mentor for so many years—protecting me from idiots like Jesse Warneke and Darby Clinton. You’re sweet, bright, compassionate, moral, not at all sexist. You’re a—a *mensch*, that’s what you are.”

He was looking at her wryly, a lopsided smile on his angular face, his front teeth protruding slightly in spite of years of orthodontic intervention. “But?”

“But I...I don’t...that is, I can’t see myself marrying you. My dad wants me to finish law school and join his firm. And that’s exactly what I intend to do.”

“So, finish law school. I certainly intend to obtain my psychology degree. Frankly, with our grades we should be able to do our post-graduate work just about anywhere we want.”

“And there’s this man....”

“Darrell Dwight. Yes, I remember. But you promised, Deanna. You promised you’d marry me if I gave you my Gift.”

She reddened. “Oh, you don’t really believe that nonsense, do you? I mean, you don’t believe that’s what really happened. Clearly, I was suffering from some sort of hysterical reaction to a childhood trauma and you just happened to apply the right psychological tools at the right moment. You’re very bright that way. You’ll make a brilliant psychologist.”

“You promised,” he repeated.

“Please, Ricky, you’re smarter than that. The girl who made that promise was a fool—an idiot. She didn’t think she’d graduate, much less be studying law at a prestigious university. She couldn’t see past the moment. A year was an eternity to her. I’m no longer that girl—that fool. Can you logically hold me to a fool’s promise?”

“You forgot, didn’t you?”

She didn’t answer, but stared at what was left the chocolate mousse on the plate between them.

“You imply that it would be unreasonable to hold you to your promise,” he said, “but is it unreasonable of me to want love and happiness? I gave you a Gift, Deanna, regardless of how it came about. Don’t you owe me something in return?”

She gave him the smile that always made Darrell rush out to buy her some ridiculous trinket. “My eternal gratitude and friendship. Next to Di, you are my best friend, Ricky.”

Ricky turned his gaze downward to his long, delicate fingers, laced together on the red table cloth.

“I’m going to let you go because I love you and have no way to hold you. I thought the Gift I gave you would make you wise enough to realize that all they say of beauty is true—it is only skin deep, and it is as it does. Apparently, I’m not as smart as I thought. I believed the fact that we’re perfectly suited intellectually and emotionally would outweigh superficial appearances. I thought you’d fall in love with me in spite of them. I was the fool, Deanna.”

He stood, gazing down at her averted face. “We should probably get going. We’ve got exams tomorrow.”

o0o

Ricky took Deanna home, said goodnight to her in the foyer, and watched wistfully as she ran upstairs. He closed his eyes as the soft scent of her perfume settled about him.

“So, Dee won’t marry you.”

He popped his eyes open and turned to see Di regarding him from the dining room archway. She blew some lank strands of hair out of her face and crossed her arms over her flat chest.

“No. I suppose I should have expected it. But I thought with her intelligence....”

“You made her smart, Ricky, not wise.”

He blinked, startled.

“Yeah, we’ve got crazy old Polish ladies in our family too, don’t forget. I sort of figured it out. In some ways she was less an idiot before than she is now. You may be a geek, but you can hold a conversation without talking about yourself non-stop, which is more than I can say about that character she’s so smitten with. I think she should hold onto you and count her blessings.”

“Maybe it won’t work out with what’s-his-name.”

Diana grinned, looking just a little like a barracuda. “You remember his name as well as I do. I suppose you’d just take her back.”

“I love her, Diana,” he said, feeling that love as a leaden weight in his breast.

“I love her too, but I stop short of letting her use me for a doormat. You’re better than that, Richard Reuben Corlicky.” She turned and disappeared into the dining room, leaving Ricky alone in his misery.

oOo

Deanna felt dreadful about it. More dreadful than she expected to. Much longer than she expected to. It was difficult for her to work up the enthusiasm she knew she should feel for Darrell’s homecoming. Guilt was a powerful emotion. But by the time he arrived in town and whisked her off to a romantic dinner for two at an exclusive restaurant on State Street, enthusiastic she was. And she was stunned when a velvet ring box appeared with the dessert course.

The diamond was immense. His proposal was flawless. Her acceptance was demure, which made him laugh.

As she admired her ring and discussed the timing of their wedding, she said, “I suppose I’ll have to transfer to Harvard, won’t I?”

She’d made him laugh again.

“What? What’s so funny?”

“Not funny, just charming. You don’t have to stay in school, sweetheart. You can quit and just come out and live with me. I have a condo off-campus.”

“Why would I do that? I’m working on a law degree.”

He seemed puzzled. “Why bother, since you aren’t going to use it?”

“Not use it? Darrell, my father’s invited me to join his law firm after graduation.”

He grinned. “He made the same invitation to me this afternoon when I told him I’d be proposing tonight. Only one of us needs to work, Dee.”

“But I want to work. I want to be a lawyer.”

“You’re not going to have time for that with the amount of entertaining we’ll be doing. I’ve decided I want to pursue a career in corporate law, so you’ll be hosting a host of parties.” He chuckled at his own lame word play. “Besides, I can’t have you competing with me for clients.”

Her face went hot, then cold, then hot again. Why in heaven’s name hadn’t they discussed this before? “You don’t have to work for my father’s firm, Darrell, I—”

“Sure I do. And if I worked for a competitor it would be even worse. We might end up on opposite sides of a case. How humiliating would that be? I mean, my own wife fighting me in court—I’d be a laughingstock.”

“A laughingstock?” Her lips were so numb she barely got the words through them. She studied his face for a moment, then broke into peals of laughter, relief flooding every vein. “Oh, you silly man! You really had me going. I thought you were serious!”

He looked supremely puzzled. “I am serious. Really, Dee, we can’t be in competition with each other. Look, you won’t have time for law once we start up a household and a family—”

“I’m going to be a lawyer, Darrell.”

“No, I’m going to be a lawyer. You’re going to be Mrs. Lawyer.” He smiled his most winning smile and reached across the table to pinch her chin playfully.

When she glanced back at him from the restaurant lobby, he was still trying to clean the raspberry crème brûlée from the ring.

It was Saturday night. Ricky and Di would be at Starbucks at this hour. They were like clockwork in their habits, reliable, loyal. It was comforting to find them there.

She stormed up to the table and without preamble and said, “Ricky, if I married you, would you try to keep me from becoming a lawyer?”

Ricky glanced sideways at Di and answered, “N-no. Why would I do that?”

“And if my father offered both of us a position in his law firm, would you find it humiliating?”

“Good God, no. You’re brilliant with legal matters, Dee. You’d be a credit to any law firm.”

“And you wouldn’t expect me to just stay home and entertain your clients and cronies?”

“No, of course not.”

“Well, Darrell would. You were right, Ricky. I was a fool. I realize that now. Beauty is as beauty does and I did poorly. I’ll never find you handsome, or even physically attractive, but our marriage will at least be a partnership of equals. We’d respect each other. Romance be damned.”

Diana gasped, one hand flying to her thin lips, the other clutching her mocha double latté with no whip. “Oh, Dee! Didn’t Aunt Katya ever tell you? When we were born, she gave us each a Gift.”

“A Gift?” repeated Deanna.

Di leaned across the table and rolled her eyes. “You know...a Gift. Like Ricky’s. I can make my beloved as intelligent as I am; you can make yours as beautiful as you are.”

“I thought that was just a bedtime story she told.”

“No. It was a spell.”

Ricky glanced back and forth between the two girls in disbelief. His eyes caught on Dee's face as it broke into the most glorious sunrise of a smile he'd ever seen.

"But that's perfect! I'll...I'll just do that right now. How does it work? Is there an incantation?"

"You just hold Ricky's hand like this," Di demonstrated, prying his fingers from his gingerbread latté and wrapping her own around them. "Then you look into his eyes like this...and wish him smart or beautiful or whatever."

Dee sat down across from Ricky at the little table and reached for his hands.

He pulled them away. "Wait a minute, Dee. I...I don't think you should waste your Gift on me."

"What waste?"

He took a deep breath and said, "I don't love you anymore."

She must have misheard him. He couldn't mean.... "What did you say?"

"When you dumped me for Darrell (who cheated in history, by the way) I realized I should never have expected you to love me. I can't say I wasted my Gift; you were miserable as you were and I had no one else to give it to. But I no longer want to marry you. There's...someone else. Someone who loves me as I am. Someone who's loved me for years."

He patted Diana's hand, which still rested on his, and gave her his full attention. Her wary expression blossomed into a radiant smile.

"You don't know what you're saying!" exclaimed Dee. "My sister is sweet and brilliant, but she's so ugly!"

"As am I."

"Not for long," Dee declared, and reached across the table to imprison one of Ricky's hands in her own.

He glanced up at her, startled, and in the moment their eyes met, she said "I give you the Gift of Looks!"

"Oh!" said Di and Dee and Ricky all at once. For neither girl could take their eyes from him, and he had caught sight of himself in the window.

Dee recovered first. “Now what do you say?” she asked. “We’re a perfect couple, aren’t we?”

And they were, or so the window told Deanna. Ricky’s hair, which had been dishwater brown, over-thick, and cow-licked, was now bronze and slightly wavy; his skin, which had been fish-belly white, now had a healthful touch of pale gold; his eyes, which she had thought monochrome gray, now reflected the greens and tawny browns of his tweed jacket; his face, which had seemed all awkward angles, now looked finely planed; and his lips, which had seemed thick, were now sensuous. Even the wire-rimmed glasses did not detract from the overall picture.

Deanna Sawicki was smitten.

Ricky rose gracefully and gazed down at her. “Yes, we are the perfect couple...superficially. But as I said before, beauty is as beauty does. You didn’t love me the way I was, but Diana did. And surprising as it may seem to you, over the last two weeks I’ve come to realize that I love her—and have loved her for some time. She’s bright and loyal and witty and wise. And beautiful in every way that matters. Thank you for the Gift, but I can’t marry you, Deanna.”

He glanced down at Diana’s empty glass and picked it up. “I’ll get us a couple more...to go.”

He moved to the front of the store amid a flutter of whispered comments from the people he passed. The art deco lights cast golden sequins in his gleaming hair as he smiled and “pardoned” his way to the counter to order. The clerk couldn’t take her eyes from him and the guy behind him in line said, “I’ll have whatever he’s having.”

Dee could only watch, stunned. “I don’t get it. I’d swear he still had a thing for me. He was tempted. He had to have been tempted.”

“I’m sure he was,” said Di.

“Then what happened? No offense, Sis, but how could he choose you?”

“Remember I said I had a Gift, too? I gave it to him while I was demonstrating...the Gift-giving technique.”

“But he was already smart.”

Di blushed. “I wasn’t sure he was smart enough not to fall for you again. After all, he did it once.”

“Only because I was beautiful. He didn’t care that I was a fool.” Dee felt bitterness push its way into her heart.

“If he’d loved you only for your looks, he’d have been all over you just like every other guy...except he’s clever enough to have succeeded where they failed. He saw something beneath the clumsiness and rudeness and stupidity that no one else did—except me and Mom and Dad. Just as he saw something beneath my homeliness.”

She picked up her purse and rose, smiling crookedly. “So, I guess I should thank you for the metamorphosis. Now, he’s brilliant *and* gorgeous. I won’t expect a wedding present.”

Dee stared at her sister as she slid past her into the aisle. “You tricked me! You planned this all along!”

Di paused to look back. “Did I?”

“You tricked me into making him beautiful!”

Di shook her head. “Actually, no. I tricked you into offering. I wanted to be sure he could turn you down. And really, don’t you think you owed him this?”

“Oh, all right. Yes, I suppose I did.”

“Besides, there’s a decided down-side.”

“Really? I fail to see it.”

“Take a look, Dee. Before, no one so much as looked at him. Now, I have to put up with that.”

Dee followed her sister’s gaze toward the clutch of patrons waiting for their drinks. Ricky was engaged in conversation with a couple of young women who were flirting with him outrageously.

Ricky, looking chagrined, pushed his glasses up his nose, and glanced over to catch Di’s eye. He smiled, dimpling adorably, and mouthed the word, “Help!”

Di returned the smile, kissed her sister on the cheek, and went to link arms with Ricky, much to the bewilderment of his audience. As they left the

store together, Di gave Dee a wave and a bright smile that made her wan face seem almost lovely.

Dee shook her head. Di may not realize it yet, but she didn't have a thing to worry about. If Ricky could pass up Deanna, it was hard to imagine how any other woman stood even half a chance. Thanks to crazy Aunt Katya, Di's gorgeous geek was bimbo proof.

At loose ends, Dee ordered herself a triple espresso, and sat down to think. She'd ruminated her way through half a cup when she became aware of a presence at her elbow. She glanced up.

The guy was vaguely comical-looking, with tousled, too-curly hair and a crooked nose. He was dressed in jeans and an open purple and gold plaid shirt with a Chicago Cubs jersey underneath. Quite the fashion statement.

"This seat taken?" he asked, and smiled in a way that transformed his face and reminded her of Ricky—before *and* after.

"It is now," she said and returned the smile.

Little Red in the 'Hood

Irene Radford

“Don’t tell me you are taking meals to *that* dirty old man!” Melissa, Friday supervisor for Mobile Meals, Inc.®, said. “I won’t let you go there.” She shook her head vigorously so that her gray corkscrew curls bobbed. A woman of her age should never try wearing that look.

A thrill of excitement ran through me. I had to fold my red lacquered fingernails against my palm. They seemed to grow longer by the minute. Not so unusual this time of the month.

I was sure everyone in the dining hall could hear Melissa over the clank of kitchen utensils, irate cooks screaming, and the chatter of six dozen hard-of-hearing honored citizens.

“Hush, now, Sugar. I volunteered to help wherever I am needed,” I replied. “Mr. Jason Hanstable needs a hot meal today. I shall deliver it.” I adjusted the drape of my brand new Italian wool red coat so that I would not have to meet her gaze.

“You don’t understand, Red.”

Everyone called me Red at Mobile Meals, Inc.® because I always wore red. Red coat, red leather pumps with a sensible two inch heel, red print skirt and blouse. They did not know that my undies were also red. Silk. Ever so sensuous and not at all proper. Possibly no one at the city’s largest geriatric charity knew my real name.

“The last time a woman took a meal to Mr. Hanstable,” Melissa said, sneering in disgust, “he fondled and harassed her so badly, she ran away screaming and never volunteered again. We refused to deliver meals to him for two whole years until his doctor and social worker intervened. They threatened a lawsuit, actually. He’s supposed to be a shut-in and helpless. Helpless he is not.”

“Maybe he has learned his lesson.” I shrugged.

“Maybe the big bad wolf should meet a real wolf. Then he’d learn a lesson,” muttered the color-blind cook’s assistant in the corner.

That idea set me to drooling.

“You have no one else to deliver to Hannibal the Lecher today. I shall go,” I countered Melissa.

“Let him go hungry for a day. Monday we’ll have some extra hands to send someone with you.”

“Melissa, sweetie, I am not without defenses. I promise you I will be safe.” Safer than Hannibal of the Many Hands, if he tried anything untoward with me.

“I’ve heard that one before. You got a black belt in karate or something?” Melissa propped her hands on her hips in a good imitation of an indignant den mother.

I’d never let her in my den, but that is another story.

“More likely a ‘red belt’,” the black-haired assistant cook muttered. She was just jealous because she had no fashion sense whatsoever. She always wore a boxy yellow-green sweater over faded sagging polyester slacks in a clashing turquoise.

“Or something, Melissa. I will be all right with Mr. Hanstable,” I reassured the boss. I grinned at Melissa, working hard to keep my canine teeth from showing.

“You know she’s not really a volunteer,” little-miss-color-blind added. “She’s here doing community service. I bet her crime was prostitution. She won’t mind at all if Mr. Hanstable fondles her.”

I rolled my eyes at Melissa to let her know that guess was totally off the mark. I would never stoop so low as to accept money for sex. But it was just too unfair of that little lingerie chain, “Victor’s Whispers” to jack up their prices so high that I could no longer afford to shop there. I had to have that blood red teddy and garter belt. No one else deserved it. No one else could flaunt it with the same aplomb as I could.

Too bad I did not notice their security camera and the burly uniformed officer in the mall before I slipped said items into my red designer tote.

Good thing for the security people that happened at the dark of the moon.

With a few more reassurances that if Mr. Hanstable, or Hannibal the Lecher, tried anything hinky with me he'd get a big surprise, I left Mobile Meals, Inc® with a stack of piping hot meals packed into Keepithot™ plastic boxes. These packages really do keep the meal warm. It always pays to buy name brands.

“Remember, it's Friday. If any of our clients complain about the baked fish, remind them that our biggest sponsor says we must not eat meat on Friday,” Melissa called after me.

“Friday. No meat. Gottcha,” I replied and ducked into my little red convertible bug of a car. No meat today! Oh, what cruel and unusual punishment.

Noon time traffic in the city is a nightmare. I jiggled and zagged my way through knots of cars, fender benders, people yelling, horns honking. One time I even had to go up on the sidewalk to get through. My little stack of plastic packages would not have a chance to chill their tootsies before I delivered them. I take my volunteer work...er...community service, very seriously.

Finally I wended into a familiar neighborhood. Tall buildings on either side of the road made this a dark canyon, even at noon. I could almost see the moon rising full. Here and there a loose brick, peeling paint, a rickety stair revealed the reduced circumstances of most of the inhabitants. And the neglect of the landlords. I had lived in my share of similar tenements and felt a twinge of pity for the locals. No more. I had a better way of life now.

Preternatural sponsors add so much to the quality of life. Let's not forget the spice as well.

My bright and shiny red car made a welcome splash of color in the drab surroundings. I parked crookedly, going the wrong way between some garbage cans and a faded blue '70 Impala up on blocks. Barely enough room to squeeze my car in. The left rear wheel perched atop the sidewalk and the hood of the car poked out into the street a teensy bit.

I know the value of positioning for a fast get-away.

“Hey, Red!” Three gang members slouched over to my car. One of them leaned on the passenger side door, leaving greasy fingerprints.

“You going to wash my car when you finish your nap?” I asked as I slid out of the other door. I flashed a lot of leg clad in red mist sheer silk stockings. Another good reason for parking that way.

The gang members opened their eyes wide, hoping to see a lot more.

While they were distracted I leaned over and picked up one of the Keepithot™ packages. This time I kept one hand modestly over my chest. Didn’t want to show these adolescents too much. They might get weird ideas about me.

While my hand was perched atop my breasts, I took the opportunity to scratch. Those nails were definitely longer. A little pink crescent showed beneath the blood red polish.

“Nice shivs, you got there, lady.” The closest gang boy gulped at the sight of my nails.

“You watch my car now, boys. Make certain no one steals it, or musses up the upholstery or anything,” I said to them, batting my enhanced eyelashes.

Their jaws dropped just a little. One of them drooled.

I also flexed my fingers, flashing more of the blood red color. A subtle warning to one and all.

Then I sashayed up the patched steps of the stoop and rang the doorbell. It did not work. I had not expected it to. Politeness is important, though, so I had to try. They drilled that into the MM, Inc. volunteers. Then I banged on the door. The screen flopped back and forth, rattling almost as loudly as my pounding.

I thought I heard a faint plea from inside for me to come in. Or stop making so much noise. That was invitation enough for me.

My sensible two inch heels clacked on the peeling linoleum, letting the world know I was here for business rather than pleasure. Spike heels make a totally different sound and impart a more frivolous attitude. It is so important to dress correctly for the occasion.

Mr. Hanstable’s apartment was on the third floor rear. Of course the elevator did not work. I hiked up my skirt, flashed some more leg to the

drunk asleep at the bottom of the stairs and climbed. And climbed. And climbed. I will need to start working out again if I keep coming here.

Hannibal the Lecher answered my knock with a feeble greeting. I pushed on the unlocked door. It creaked open ominously.

Before age and a life of dissipation took their toll, Mr. Hanstable had been a handsome man. Even now, amidst the forest of wrinkles, the sparse white hair, and dark sagging pouches under the eyes, his countenance made my heart go pitter-pat.

His skin was so thin I could see his blood pulsing in his neck.

And other parts. Hannibal of the Many Hands sat in his recliner stark naked and ready. I mean *really* ready.

“I am your Mobile Meals, Inc.® volunteer today, Mr. Hanstable,” I announced myself. I licked my lips in lust for the man. My breath came so sharp and shallow I had trouble hiding my elongating teeth.

He pried his eyes away from the pornographic beauty contest on the television—or should I say boob tube? Then he pushed a lever and banged his recliner into the upright position. His gaze riveted upon my short skirt that clung in all the right places. Gradually he shifted his attention upward, glanced at my face and then fixated upon my bosom.

“Well aren’t you a tidy little package,” he said, wagging his shaggy eyebrows. Two hairs stuck straight up from each white brow, reminding me of an eccentric bird’s feathers. My appetite decreased at the image.

“Where would you like me to put your meal, Mr. Hanstable?” I stared at his face and spare frame as openly as he stared at me. My, my, he just might know how to satisfy all of my appetites.

“Right here in my lap, sweet cheeks. You do come with the meal, don’t you?”

“How about I put the container on the kitchen table?” I walked to the old green Formica and metal piece between the television and the kitchenette.

“I like to eat pretty young things on the table.” Hannibal the Lecher was out of his chair so quickly I hardly had time to form a protest. His hands sought my chest with the accuracy of magnet to iron.

“Not much there, mostly padding,” he said squeezing me hard enough to make me wince a little, even beneath several inches of foam. “That’s okay, sweet cheeks. It’s what’s down below that counts.”

“More than you know,” I replied letting my voice drop to its normal baritone register.

He jumped back in surprise as he fondled my family jewels.

“What kind of tricks are those prudes at MM, Inc. trying to pull this time?” he shouted. He scraped his hand against the upholstery of his recliner as if trying to clean a soiled paw.

“No tricks at all. They needed a volunteer. I volunteered.” I stalked him. My blood was up now. I wanted satisfaction. I needed satisfaction. Sprouting fur beneath my padded bra began to itch. My lovely red shoes became too small. I kicked them off.

“Aren’t you going to eat your meal? It’s Friday. Fish day,” I coaxed him. He continued to back away from me.

“Get away from me, you unnatural pervert!” he screamed. His back was up against the wall by the single window. He groped to the right.

I shed my lovely silk blouse, revealing the purloined scarlet lace teddy. It opened down the front, held in place by three little red bows.

He tried to look away, but the sight of my hips shimmying out of the tight skirt kept his horror-struck gaze upon me.

Then his hand found what he sought. He brought a shotgun up and cocked it.

“Oh, you don’t want to do that, Mr. Hanstable,” I cooed. Saliva ran thick in my mouth. My body flushed with heat. I itched all over in response to the threat.

“Don’t come any closer,” he said. “I’ll shoot.” His hands shook so badly, he could not maintain his aim.

“It won’t do you any good.”

“Wh...what?”

“No good at all.” My voice began to slur as my appetite began to take control over my body. “Ordinary ammunition can’t truly hurt a

shapechanger,” I purred. “Meet your local werewolf, Mr. Big Bad Wolf,” I laughed.

I shed the blood red garter belt and red mist stockings. They cost too much to risk tearing them. My legs thickened as my joints twisted into new angles.

“I didn’t really mean those things, miss, uh, sir.”

“Very definitely a sir at the moment,” I replied. The teddy landed on the floor next to the matching garter belt. Definitely too small for me in the middle of a change.

No time to neatly fold them.

“You wanted to eat me. I want to eat you. Turn about is fair play.”

One swipe of my reddish furred paw sent the shotgun flying. He cowered in the corner, arms over his head.

I closed my maw upon his neck and let my incisors prick his flesh. His blood tasted rancid with old age, cheap booze, and tobacco. I spat it out.

“Eeew! You taste funny.” I withdrew and reached for my clothes. The urge to change slid away from me like shedding my silk lingerie. “This is my ’hood, Mr. Jason Hanstable. Mine. I protect it. Think you can refrain from molesting my volunteers from Mobile Meals, Inc.®, Mr. Jason Hanstable?”

He groaned something incomprehensible.

“Cause you see, if I hear about you trying anything funny with one of my ladies, I’ll have to come back and finish the job. I protect my ’hood. And I won’t return on a Friday.”

“Wh...why not?” he asked through his tears. A yellow stain spread on the carpet between his legs.

I wrinkled my now human nose in distaste.

“I never eat meat on a Friday, even if it is a full moon. Enjoy your fish, Mr. Hanstable.”

Out on the landing, I wiggled into my red clothing. No sense in letting the gang members guarding my car see the real me when the illusion is so much nicer.

Just as I thought, the boys hung around my convertible—now isn't it appropriate that I drive something that changes conformation at will? I kissed each one of them sweetly on the cheek. I let my fingers trail down the arm of the biggest of the boys as I fluttered my eyelashes at him. He looked like such a tasty hunk.

Safely behind the wheel of my little red car, I looked at the list of deliveries. Ah, Mrs. Peabody two blocks over needs her meal. Perhaps I should detour just long enough to put on the red slacks, silk shirt, and athletic shoes I keep stored in the trunk. Of course, if I become the big strong man she needs to do some chores, I'd have to remove my make-up. Oh, well. She's one of the ladies in my 'hood and I aim to please.

Around a Campfire...

Hero/Monster, by Amy Sterling Casil

To Ride Beyond the Wide World's End, by Judith Tarr

Turnabout, by Deborah J. Ross

Hero/Monster

Amy Sterling Casil

The world ended yesterday.

In the cold, bright morning of the new day, Beowulf found Unferth's arm and brought it to him.

Unferth lay groaning from his wounds in the Great Hall of Heorot. He had gone down like a true warrior, fighting Grendel's Dam with great skill, but to no avail. The monstrous hag had ripped Unferth's arm off at the shoulder, leaving the torn ends crimson, and sticky with the warrior's half-frozen blood.

She liked to do that, Beowulf thought. She'd done the same to his own arm not two nights before, and he had only just healed.

Unferth woke as Beowulf knelt over him.

"So it begins again," he said, with a bleak expression on his blood-streaked face. He sat up clumsily, trying to balance with his remaining arm.

Tenderly, Beowulf pressed Unferth's severed arm against his shoulder and watched as the flesh knit itself back together, accompanied by Unferth's groans of pain. The healing always hurt.

The cry of an infant echoed through the Great Hall. But it sounded all wrong: wet and bubbly.

Unferth's pale blue eyes widened. "Gods," he said. But he need not have said anything, for Beowulf already knew what had happened. As they had lain senseless and torn, the fiend had gone for Wiglaf, Beowulf's son.

Each night for six moons, Grendel's Dam had laid waste to the warriors of Heorot and their women. Yet because they had hidden him with care and skill, Wiglaf alone had survived. Not only survived, but grown!

And each night of that six-month, the fiend had smelled Wiglaf's infant scent, but could not find him. Beowulf knew that the monstrous crone wanted his son's baby blood. She lusted for it more dearly than lovers lust

for each other. It was only natural, Beowulf reflected. Wiglaf's suffering would revenge her for her monstrous son Grendel's death. The night before, it had first been Unferth who had distracted her, and then Beowulf.

But Unferth had failed. Beowulf had failed.

Grendel's Dam was unlike any other monster Beowulf had ever known, though he had fought sea monsters, and dragons, and had truly vanquished the hag's own son, Grendel.

Grendel's thick, dying blood had blackened Heorot's lake, but as they feasted in victory, the hag issued forth from the dark and brackish mess, screaming her loneliness and fierce rage, and cursing them all, Danes and Geatish hero alike.

"Fight and die each night. Live again next morn. Blood and misery be your dominion until you learn to live."

The learning of it hardly made any sense. If only they could stop living. Every morning, they would wake to find themselves torn limb from limb. And though they screamed with pain, and yearned for death, their torn, broken bodies would knit themselves together; and then they did it all again.

Unferth had healed enough to walk. He grasped Beowulf's wrist as the infant's cries grew desperate, rising into a keening wail of agony. The warrior-friends searched the carnage-strewn hall for Beowulf's son. They stepped over the severed limbs of yet-to-be healed Danelaw warriors as they searched for Wiglaf, finding his tiny, broken body near the ashes of the women's hearth.

"May the Gods destroy her," Unferth said, as Beowulf gathered his infant son in his arms.

Beowulf forced himself to watch the ragged, bloody tissues of his child's tiny chest as the flesh rippled in the cold air, struggling to knit itself together.

"This must stop," Beowulf said, his teeth clenched.

"But what shall we do?" Unferth asked. "We fight her every night. Are we not brave men? Did you not vanquish her son? And he was more powerful than she, I swear it."

Beowulf shook his head. "In body, perhaps," he said. "But her rage has fueled this curse."

"The Gods have turned from us," Unferth said, lowering his head in shame.

Beowulf felt himself smiling cheerlessly as he held Wiglaf close to his chest, and the child's desperate cries quieted.

"Do you think they have forsaken us, brother?"

Unferth's blue eyes were clouded with uncertainty, and fear. "I do not know. We are responsible for our own lives, I do know that."

"Look," Beowulf said, pointing to the rest of the Danes, groaning as they gathered their torn limbs and put themselves back together in silent, tight-lipped agony. "Do you think that the world can end each night and come back every morning forever? There has to be an end to this," he said. "Even if it means a true death. For all of us."

Unferth said nothing.

Wiglaf's innocent face, eyes shut tight, cheeks streaked red with blood, his hair dark and knotted with dried blood, and caked gray ashes from the hearth, made Beowulf's throat tighten in anger and grief.

"I would do anything to keep my son from this," he said. "Even kill him with Hrunting, my own sword."

"No," Unferth replied. He grabbed Beowulf's wrist. "That cannot be. Such a death cannot be right." Beowulf stopped, suddenly wondering if he *could* kill Wiglaf. Or kill anyone any longer. Whatever died rose again. And again, and again.

As if she knew what they spoke, and thought, the cackling cry of Grendel's dam echoed from her lair deep in the black waters of the nearby lake.

Unferth's expression turned to horror. Beowulf watched him gather what courage he could find. Then he spoke. "We hid your son from her for a long time. He grew, Beowulf. That's something, isn't it?"

Beowulf nodded. Unferth was right. "Perhaps there is some hope."

"Let us try again to fight her. Tonight we will go to the lake and attack her in her lair."

Beowulf shook his head. "That did not work before," he said. She'd slain them all, and it had taken the warriors the better part of that day to gather their strewn parts from the lakeshore and return to Heorot, where they finally healed. "That will not work. But perhaps, something else will."

"What other plan have you?" Unferth asked.

"Perhaps we should not fight her at all," Beowulf said.

Unferth stepped back, astonished.

"Perhaps it is not only her blood lust which fuels this curse," Beowulf said, smoothing his son's delicate curls.

"You mean that we have a part, too?" Unferth asked. This was much like him, for he was the Danish teller of tales, quick when he chose to be so.

Beowulf nodded. He loathed Grendel's Dam so fiercely that he even forgot Wiglaf for hours at a time. Such hate ate away at a man. It could bring no good. Beowulf wondered if the hag would fight and hate as long as they fought and hated. As if six months of hell weren't proof enough that the battle with the monster was a fight they could not possibly win.

But to give up? The men of Heorot were Danish warriors, and he the Geatish hero. It was a strange thought. He turned it over in his mind, holding Wiglaf tight to his chest, smoothing the child's tangled hair.

"Unferth, they say that true madness is doing the same thing over and over when it does not give a man any benefit."

Unferth rubbed his shoulder and looked back at Beowulf, eyes glittering.

"Let's welcome the hag to Heorot this evening," Beowulf said. "Let us prepare her a feast, and have her sit at our table."

"Gods!" Unferth exclaimed.

Beowulf looked steadily in his friend's hooded eyes. In a moment, he saw those eyes flicker, and knew that Unferth came to understand his plan.

"You mean that if we do not fight her, she will not fight us," he said.

Beowulf laughed. "I do not know," he said. "But I know that we cannot go on like this. Unless you care to lose any limb you've got every night, and all your blood." Beowulf cut himself short. He had been about to add, "And I, my son."

"No," Unferth said. "I do not care for that."

“Then let us tell everyone. We will greet the fiend with smiles and open arms. Her feast will be as grand as if she were the visiting King of the Geats.”

King of the Geats. Beowulf had hoped to gain that title by killing the monster Grendel. Now—he was King of—undeath.

Worst of all, he had lost his wife, slaughtered by the fiend Grendel, with no new life for her—only a fire in the dark Danish night.

Again the rage filled him. Had he no right to slay Grendel? And now, to slay his hag of a mother?

But he said nothing to Unferth. He pushed the anger down deep, to a place where he could not name what it was, nor speak a word of it. He turned his thoughts toward the feast that they must prepare for the monster, for that was where hope lay. Meat they had aplenty, for Grendel’s Dam had torn out the throats of Heorot’s cattle, broken the backs of the goats, and shredded the bellies of the pigs. The animals were barely beginning to heal, so Beowulf and Unferth had meat aplenty for the feast.

That evening, the healed Danes of Heorot and their bitter Geatish hero sat along the long table. The smell of roast goat and pig and beef filled the hall, and the torches were lit, flickering red light across their broad-cheeked faces, glistening over their blond braids and casting little dancing flames in the eyes of the beautiful Danish women. Beautiful now, Beowulf thought, though they were not so once Grendel’s Dam took hold of them.

But tonight she would not do that, he thought. He had to keep hope in his heart. Somehow.

Beowulf took his seat at the head of the long table, his sword Hrunting sheathed behind his back and little Wiglaf at his side in a willow cradle. Nearby, Unferth lifted a horn of mead to his lips with an unsteady hand, but his black eyes were hard and brave.

When Grendel’s Dam came, ravening, Beowulf greeted her with forced heartiness.

“Come in,” he said. “Welcome to Heorot. Sit with us. Eat and drink.”

The monster’s hair snaked in her eyes, tangled and dripping dark water like clotted blood. She tossed her hair aside and surveyed the Great Hall,

hissing.

“Why are your weapons sheathed?” she asked in a wet, awful voice.

“Make you to trick me?”

Beowulf stood steady. Every instinct cried for him to unsheathe Hrunting and leap at her. He saw the same urge to battle on the faces of all of the Danish men, especially on Unferth’s honest face.

Little Wiglaf stirred in his cradle beside the long table, then cried out.

“There is the precious little one,” Grendel’s Dam said in a dry, ominous whisper, like leaves crackling underfoot.

“Come and feast with us,” Beowulf said, forcing a smile.

Her horrible red eyes twinkled as her mouth twisted in a snarl. Strands of foul weeds from the bottom of the lake dangled between her sharp yellow teeth.

“The food smells good,” she said, after a moment. Beowulf realized that the expression on her monstrous face was no snarl—the monster had been trying to smile.

“I will sit with you and eat,” she said.

Beowulf looked about the table. On each warrior’s face he saw a reflection of his own feelings: equal parts of hope and fear.

Beowulf led the hideous crone to the table. She was light green and scaled all over, with a long fish-skin robe thrown over her shoulder, then wrapped around her waist. Half again as tall as Beowulf, himself taller than any Dane, she seemed to stoop, and looked about almost shyly as she sat in the carved oaken seat set aside for her, and sniffed at a joint of roasted goat.

The Great Hall was silent, for no one dared to speak. Grendel’s Dam grabbed the goat haunch and commenced gnawing on it, her lips smacking with relish. From time to time, she paused in her gluttony, gulping a long draught of mead.

“Good,” she said, after she drank. She belched.

Beowulf motioned for the others to eat, though he saw no hearty appetites around the table. Then Unferth asked to tell a story. Beowulf nodded. He was a brave one, Beowulf thought. His voice was strong and clear, though Beowulf caught the fear flickering in his friend’s kind eyes.

“I will tell the story of Leir,” Unferth said. And this is the tale that he told:

All know the tale of Leir, the king of the Britons in days long past. He had three daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. Leir was a great king in his youth, but in his age, he grew foolish and weak. He did not understand the greed, and the lust, in the hearts of his daughters. And when Leir grew very old, he wearied of the kingship and wished to pass it on, but he had not declared an heir. He thought to divide his kingdom equally between the three daughters. He called them to him, and told them of his great plan.

Then Leir—

“Stop!” cried Grendel’s Dam, rising from her chair. Her red eyes flashed. She froze Unferth with a single, terrible glare, then turned her eyes on Beowulf.

“This is how you welcome me?” she asked. “A tale of a father and his wretched daughters? What of the tale of a mother...and her son?”

Beowulf nodded toward Unferth, saying, “This is one of our best-known tales. Surely there is—”

“You are sure of nothing, hero,” the hag snarled. “There is your pretty boy in his cradle. How nicely he has healed since this morn.”

Beowulf grasped Hrunting’s cold iron grip. “We welcomed you in good will,” he said, the muscles in his thighs tensing.

Grendel’s Dam had a strength born of rage and grief and hardened by spells cast in her deep, dark caves at the bottom of the black-water lake. And she had no need of extra magic for speed, for she had always been quick, or so the tales went.

Beowulf was hardly out of his seat when she’d leapt past him, snatching the willow cradle. Beowulf reached for his son, grasping a branch from the cradle, which snapped in his fingers.

Wiglaf wailed, his tiny hands clutching for his father, a few inches beyond Beowulf’s grasp.

It may as well have been leagues. Grendel’s Dam thrust out her free arm and struck Beowulf below his throat, shattering his collarbone into pulp. Beowulf fell to one knee, clutching at his neck, gasping in pain. Unferth

started forward, but she drove him back by unsheathing one pale green, blade-sharp claw, poising it right above Wiglaf's soft, white neck.

She shielded her chest and neck with the screaming, cradled infant. Her vicious red eyes mocked Beowulf as he struggled to his feet.

"I have your prize," she said. "Catch me if you can...brave hero."

The other Danes advanced warily, swords unsheathed. Beowulf held up his hand.

"No," he rasped, barely able to speak, for her blow had done that much damage. She had struck carefully, wanting to silence him.

"Does it hurt?" she asked Beowulf, smiling to show all of her snagged yellow teeth.

"No," he lied. Then, spoke to the gathered warriors. "Get back. She'll spill his blood if we don't let her pass."

"Madness!" Unferth cried out, stepping in the hag's way and wielding his short, broad Danish blade. "This is your son, Beowulf. You see how she repays our hospitality."

Grinning with contempt and rage, Grendel's Dam rushed forward, grabbing Unferth's wrist. He blanched. Beowulf heard the bones of his wrist snapping, and the clatter of his sword hitting the stone floor. Unferth's eyes widened as the hag, clutching Wiglaf with one arm, whipped her scaly forearm toward his face. Unferth tried to shy away, but he was too slow. His neck snapped back, the bones cracking like a dry faggot being broken for a fire, and his body dropped limply to the floor.

Looking once about the room, Grendel's Dam said two words, very softly.

"Follow me." Then she was silhouetted in the door and she disappeared into the black night.

Beowulf looked down at his friend's body in uncertain grief. He did not know if a broken neck would heal in the morning. Pray to the Gods it would.

Pushing the Danelaw warriors and women from his path, Beowulf ran after the fiend, his shattered bones grinding agonizingly as he forced himself forward.

The warriors started after him. He turned back at the door.

“Let me take her,” he said. “On my honor.”

Several of the bravest stepped forth, shaking their heads, their blades unsheathed.

“On my honor,” he repeated.

Slowly, the Danelaw warriors nodded.

“All right,” one of them said, crossing his arms, his pale face hard in the flickering torchlight. “But don’t come back if you fail. You and your boy are no longer welcome here. We’ll take our own chances with this beast.”

So, it had come to this, at last. They’d called him forth to rescue them, and now they all blamed him. If he had not killed Grendel, no curse would have come down. And his plan to make peace with her? A miserable failure. And she had Wiglaf.

If he somehow survived without vanquishing her, Beowulf did not want to come back. He nodded once, shattered bones grinding brutally, then he turned and went after her, trotting steadily, breathing as carefully as he could despite the pain.

The hag was quick, but Beowulf had Hrunting’s sharp blade and courage. And he was a hero. Wasn’t he?

He entered the forest which lay between Heorot and the lake. Once it had been a lovely place of linden and birch. Now the trees were dead and leafless. Winter had fallen upon these Danish lands along with the curse, and it showed no signs of lifting. A light snow dusted the ground. As Beowulf ran, it began to snow harder, tiny razors of ice cutting at his cheeks.

“You bitch,” he rasped. “Where are you?”

A distant cackle sounded through the trees.

Beowulf paused, listening. Again, the cackle.

He followed the hag’s voice deeper into the forest.

“Here I am,” she said.

Beowulf looked up to see Grendel’s Dam perched in a linden tree. She was empty-armed.

“Wiglaf!” he cried.

“The boy is safe,” she said.

Beowulf couldn't believe her. She'd savaged his son. He'd kill her, or die trying.

He raised Hrunting over his head, ignoring the hot spikes of pain searing through him, and brought the great sword down on the Linden branch where she sat, cleaving it in two.

She tumbled down, but there was a smile on her face. A smile! And she did not leap up, but lay there helplessly.

Beowulf straddled her with his powerful legs, sword poised to pierce her awful body.

“Kill me and your son is lost forever,” she said.

The sword point pressed into her foul flesh. Beowulf's vision clouded with fury. Her form was vague and hazy.

“Blood lust,” she hissed. “Go on.”

“Wiglaf,” he whispered, blinking to clear his eyes and push back the rage.

Then, he heard the cry of an infant. He turned, and she leapt up, then shoved him to the ground. With a grunt of disgust, she tore Hrunting from his grasp and with her long arms, easily held it out of his reach.

Grendel's Dam loomed over Beowulf, as he'd stood over her a moment earlier. Her claws glittered in the moonlight.

“Kill me,” he said. “That's just. That will end it, won't it?”

She said nothing, merely baring her teeth.

Beowulf spoke. “You've taken my son's life for your son Grendel's. You've taken my wife, son, my honor. Now take my head and bury it deep so I will not come alive again.”

He closed his eyes and turned his head, showing her his throat.

He felt her hot breath on his neck. He turned back, opening his eyes to see her kneeling over him.

“I have not killed your son,” she said. “I am not...like that.”

“You're a monster,” Beowulf said.

“And you are a fool,” she replied, kneeling heavily on his chest. She grabbed his hair and raised his head, looking straight in his eyes.

“Kill me now,” he said roughly.

She smiled. “Don’t you understand?”

Beowulf did not.

“Haven’t you ever looked in the hearts of those you fight? Do you think that my soul is as twisted as my body?”

“A monster has no soul,” Beowulf said. “Only men have souls.”

“Not monsters or women?”

“Pah! I meant—”

“Too ugly to have a soul, is what you meant,” she said. She began to toy with his hair. Her breath was hot and foul in his face.

“Yes,” he said. “Things like you should never have been born.”

“And it’s your job to rid the world of us?” she asked.

“You kill me now, or I’ll kill you,” he said.

She drew one of her claws across his throat. The pain was sharp, but the cut was not deep. As she raised her hand, the blood glittered darkly.

“Why?” he asked. Why had she hunted them each night like animals? Why had she not killed them all outright to avenge her son’s death? What was this mad game? She was—

Crying.

Hot tears mixed with Beowulf’s blood, stinging and burning. The tears of a woman, not a monster.

Beowulf could never abide a woman’s tears.

“Stop,” he said. “Please.” And, almost unknowing, he raised his arm, for she had moved back and no longer held him fast. He touched her cheek.

She stroked his hand with one of her vile, bloody claws. Gently.

Beowulf’s chest knotted. He scarcely knew what he felt for a moment, then he realized suddenly what was coursing through his chest.

Compassion. For she was so bereft.

“You grieve,” he said.

She nodded, holding his hand against her cheek.

“What’s to be done?” he asked.

The infant’s wail came through the forest again. He turned toward the sound.

“Go,” she said, getting to her feet. “He’s not far.”

Beowulf thought that he began to understand. A little. “I still have my son,” he said. “But yours is gone—forever.”

She crossed her arms, holding her chest. She would not meet his eye.

“That’s it,” he said. “What you wanted me to understand.”

“No,” she said softly.

Wiglaf began to shriek. Beowulf retrieved Hrunting, ready to run toward the source of the child’s desperate cries.

She spoke again as he started into the forest. “He was a poor, misbegotten thing, my son. But he was all I had.”

“He was laying waste to the lands of the Danes. He had to be stopped,” Beowulf said. “They called me forth to stop the menace.”

“And you did,” she said, bitterly.

“He killed my wife,” Beowulf replied.

“Yes,” she said. “I know.”

“I did what I had to do,” Beowulf said.

She raised her tear-stained face and looked steadily at him. Grief was plain on her face, but of her former fury and rage there remained no trace.

“So answer me this,” she said in a level voice. “What makes you any less the monster than he?”

“I’m the—”

“Hero?” she asked.

Wiglaf howled. He sounded closer than ever.

“Yes, hero,” Beowulf said. And he started away.

“I’ll come for you,” she said. Her voice was full of chill certainty. It followed him as he searched for Wiglaf.

Finding him unharmed, yet out of breath from crying. He was snug in his cradle beneath a linden tree like the one where he’d found Grendel’s Dam perched.

Beowulf took Wiglaf from the cradle and held him close. The child’s cries did not quiet, though, for he saw the blood on Beowulf’s neck, and felt his father’s uneasy fear, and shrieked.

Then Grendel’s Dam was beside them.

“Now it ends!” In a rush of anger, Beowulf raised his sword, holding Wiglaf close, as much behind his body as he could manage.

“You fight with the child in your arms?”

“Why not?” He slashed at her. She leapt nimbly aside.

“Why don’t you let me kill you, and then I’ll take the child. To replace the one I’ve lost.”

Beowulf roared at her and charged. She leapt out of his way once more. His boot caught on a root hidden beneath the forest leaves and he fell flat. Wiglaf screamed. Hrunting slipped from his grasp. He struggled to reach the sword, but her scaled foot, rough and icy-cold, came down on his wrist.

“No,” she said. “Give me the child now. It’s at an end.”

“I’ll kill him first,” Beowulf said, tearing his hand from under her foot and rolling away, giving no thought to the fact that he nearly crushed Wiglaf as he did so. He got to his feet and held Wiglaf high. The boy’s face was smeared with Beowulf’s blood. His eyes were shut tight, his mouth open and gasping.

“Go ahead,” Grendel’s Dam said. Then, in a whisper, she added, “Hero.”

Wiglaf’s eyes opened. He’d been holding his breath, but it rushed out in a sigh, then he shrieked in absolute terror, his baby eyes fixed—on Beowulf’s face.

Wiglaf was terrified, but not of the hag. Of him. His own father.

“Gods,” Beowulf said. “I can’t—”

Now Grendel’s Dam looked on Beowulf with compassion in her monstrous red eyes.

“No,” she said. “Nor could I.”

Beowulf gazed at her, wondering.

“You mean—”

“Yes, I knew my son should not live. He was truly a monster, and knew no law or honor. But how could I kill him with my own hands? My own flesh, my own blood.”

“I killed him,” Beowulf said.

“But all unknowing,” she said. “Unthinking. For revenge, not justice. And you’ve reaped the rewards.”

Beowulf nodded. He held Wiglaf more gently, cradling him once more.

“So how do we end this?” he asked.

She gazed at him a long moment. “Come with me,” she said. “Learn justice, and what monsters and heroes really are.”

Beowulf shivered. “To the lake?” he asked. He would become a monster, for he could imagine no hero in him any longer.

She nodded. He closed his eyes and thought. Yes. He must go with her. It was the only way.

“Do not worry about your son,” she said. “He will grow strong. He will be a great king, of both the Danes and the Geats. So I have dreamed.”

Beowulf put Wiglaf gently into the soft leaves of the forest.

“Your friend Unferth will find the child in the morning and be as a father to him.” Grendel’s Dam knelt and covered Wiglaf with her fish-skin cloak.

They walked together through the forest to the shore of the black-water lake. Snow fell lightly, glittering in their hair, and dusting their shoulders.

Beowulf took her monstrous hand in his. As the sun rose fresh upon the lands of the Danes, the Geatish hero and Grendel’s Dam descended into the deep.

To Ride Beyond the Wide World's End

Judith Tarr

A Story for Book View Café's 1000th Member Celebration

Written for David Tackett

Madog was a bard of Gwynedd, back in the days when the Romans were still a clear and all but present memory. He had a fine voice and a fine harp, and a fine eye for a horse, too, which ran in the family, it was said. There was blood of old gods there; and maybe Rhiannon herself had taken a fancy to one of his ancestors, riding past his steading on a bright spring morning, mounted on a white mare who might be Epona, and then again might not. But are not all mares incarnations of the goddess?

By Madog's time the memory had faded but the leaning toward horses was as strong as ever. Which made Madog a most unhappy man, because he had lost his horse to a colic over the winter, and come spring he was reduced to the service of his own two feet, trudging the hills of Wales and singing for his supper.

That particular night of spring—which, it being Wales, meant icy rain, cutting wind, and the Wild Hunt howling over the hilltops—Madog happened to be in considerable comfort. The hill fort was old but had been got at by Romans, which meant working plumbing, a hypocaust that still heated the tiled floors, and walls that kept out the wind better than any he had been in since he made satires for the old duke of battles in Caerleon.

With good ale to wet his throat and dry warmth to make his fingers supple, he was in fine form that night, and the chieftain and his band of followers were generous with their praise and their rewards. He found himself the owner of a new wool cloak, a copper brooch enameled in blue

and green, a lightly used pair of leather shoes, and the chieftain's glowing admiration.

"Those verses of yours," old Coel said as the fire died and the hall subsided into a sort of rollicking quiet, "they're clever. Especially your description of that son of a swine down the valley—how did you know he's wall-eyed and has a distinct left hook to his private member?"

"Well," said Madog, "the eye's easy to see when you're singing in front of him. As to the other...let's say it's a trade secret."

Old Coel's bushy white brow arched; he laughed. "Caught him in the jakes, did you?"

Madog shrugged and smiled. Sometimes it was safer to let the patron decide how the story went.

Coel thumped him on the shoulder, and grinned when he barely swayed. Madog was light and wiry as horsemen often are, but he was strong as they often are, too. "Gofannwy won't thank you for the things you sang of him, but I'll be warming my evil old heart for days with the thought of them. I owe you a debt for that; I'd like to pay it, for my honor and your pleasure. You're a horseman, you say? And yet you walked through my gate."

Madog nodded. His throat still tightened when he thought of his beautiful mare down and gasping in the snow, so far gone with pain that she could not even will to move. He had cut her throat for mercy, and wept for hours after.

Old Coel saw the tears that brimmed in his eyes, and nodded. He was a horseman, too. "In the morning," he said, "we'll go out to the fields and see what's minded to follow you on your travels."

That was a gift worthy of a king. And yet Madog said, "I don't know—I still—"

"Have a look at least," said Coel, "and see what you can see."

Madog could hardly refuse that; he had been ungracious enough as it was. He bowed and held his peace.

Coel's horses were famous in that district, and with good reason. He bred the sturdy stock of the hills for the most part, on the larger side for riding, though they could still pull a cart or a war-car if they had the need. Romans had meddled with the lines and given them a bit of fineness from the east, a larger eye or a more refined throat, and a turn of speed that served Coel well in war or in the races.

Most of the stock in residence were mares either nursing young foals or big-bellied and ready to drop, and the stallion in his royal enclosure, shaking his heavy neck and shrilling at the ladies. Coel led Madog past these to a pasture out by the river, where geldings and a few unbred mares grazed the spring grass.

"These we keep to ride," Coel said. "I'll give you your pick of them, save only the blaze-faced roan yonder—that's my darling, and she stays with me."

Madog had to smile at that. He was still in a dark mood, grieving for his lost mare, but the sun was shining and the wind was blowing, and there were horses all around him, come away from their grazing to investigate the stranger. Some were very fine indeed, and taller than the usual; they had old Roman blood, he could see.

He did not mean or want to look at any of them with a thought for taking it with him. He appreciated a good horse, that was all, and there were a dozen of those here, sniffing his hair and nuzzling his hands and blowing sweet breath in his face.

One in particular kept insisting he pay attention to her. She was far from the tallest and far from the most elegant: a sturdy, stocky, bright-eyed hill pony, with big solid feet and a fast set of heels. But she had the dappled grey coat that came from the Romans' blood, and her head was finer than one might expect, though still substantial, with a straight nose and a deep jaw.

"That one," Madog heard himself say. "That's the one."

"Is she now?" said Coel. "That's my great disappointment. I bred my darling to a stallion from Spain, hoping to get a war charger to make my neighbors sit up and take notice, and this is what came of it. She takes after

her mother, as you can see. There's hardly anything of her father in her at all."

Madog could indeed see. The dam was a sturdy hill pony, and a fine example of her tribe she was; except for the moon-colored coat and the chiseled head, the daughter was the living image of her.

Madog had no objection at all to hill ponies. His lost beloved had been one. They made more sense here than the ram-nosed chargers of Spain or the slender, deer-like creatures of Arabia.

While he pondered the vagaries of horse breeding, the grey mare had chased all the others away and planted herself in front of him. In his head, as clear as a reflection in a motionless pool, was a picture of himself on her back.

Coel's stableman had a saddle ready, and a bridle: good solid stuff like the horse who would wear them, with quality that showed itself to the discerning eye.

"She's green," Coel said as Madog discovered that fact for himself, "but she's had enough of a start on her to go on with. You can ride her out today if it suits you, though I'd be glad of another night's singing."

o0o

Madog stayed for another night and then two, to be gracious and because the weather turned foul again. When on the third day he left, he was richer by a purse of Roman silver, a new change of clothes, and all that he had won before, with the mare being the greatest prize of the lot.

How much of a prize she was, even Madog barely suspected as he took the westward road. He had a thought to wander on down to Aber and try his luck at the gathering of the bards, but there was time and to spare for that. He could use it to polish his new songs, explore some new country, and smooth the rough edges off his new mare.

She had opinions, did Ceinwen. She expressed them with teeth and heels, and if he was on her back, she made him work for it.

She had none of the sweetness of his dear lost beauty. He was glad of it. If they had been too much alike, he would have hated her.

As it was, he cursed her often enough. He had a fair opinion of himself as a horseman. Ceinwen showed him exactly where, and what, his failings were.

Madog was a horseman. He lived for the challenge. "But sometimes," he said to her as he extricated himself from a thornbush under her scornful eye, "I could stand for a little less educating and a little more cooperating."

She would not let him mount again immediately. He had to trudge beside her up the long steep hill.

At the top he paused to breathe. The valley in front of him was familiar: he had been aiming toward it. The town there had a good tavern or two, and a fondness for the kind of music he made.

That was well and he was glad, but he should have had another day's worth of riding before he came this far. He had not lost a day. He was not that kind of man. He always knew where he was and where he had been, and what end of the day it was.

Yet here it was, and here he was. He had been arguing precedence with Ceinwen, and she had pitched him into a bramble. He had the scratches to prove it, and one splendid bruise on his behind.

He looked back. The road he had been on was perfectly straight. The one ahead of him twisted and wound down the hill, as roads did in this untidy world.

He rolled an eye at Ceinwen. She tugged hard at the rein, aiming for a patch of grass.

Madog knew about straight tracks. Who in Wales did not? One traveled them at one's peril. Mostly however they simply made the skin shiver or the feet tingle, and at dawn or dusk one might see travelers who were not of the common or human sort.

He tried to think how long he had been on this one, and when he had first stepped on it. There was that village with the shrine and the well. He had reckoned to take the road that ran on past it, a straight road, but that was because it was Roman, not because it was magic.

Unless of course the Romans had built their road on a track that had been there before it. Romans conquered magic as they did everything else, and

made it their own.

Madog had walked and ridden on Roman roads and straight tracks all his life. He was a bard; he traveled. He knew every sensible way to get from here to there. This was not a sensible way.

He seemed to have taken no harm from it, which was more than he could say for Ceinwen and his backside. She let him mount finally, with only a half-hearted attempt to bite his foot as he settled into the saddle. It was late and she had hopes of hay and barley and maybe a little sweetness, down in the town that she had brought him to.

“*You* brought me?” Madog inquired. “Did I have nothing to do with it, then?”

Ceinwen wanted a bowl of barley and a night under a roof, out of the rain. Madog considered the sky, which was clear blue, scarce a cloud to be seen, and reckoned that the barley might be the truer temptation.

He would be happy enough to lie in a bed tonight, whether it rained or no. He shrugged and let her carry him down off the hill.

oOo

The rain rolled in soon after dark, with wind and lightning. Ceinwen was safe and content under the stable roof, with hay and barley in front of her. She savored both while Madog sang for their supper.

He could think while he sang, and he could not stop thinking about Ceinwen. That she was a horse of remarkable intelligence, he had known from the moment he saw her. Since he came to know her, he had begun to understand just how remarkable that intelligence was.

Every horse has much to say to anyone who has the will or the capacity to listen. Horses talk constantly: a language of expression, movement, and feeling. Humans to them are poor stunted things, all but deaf and nearly blind; a horse has to shout at them to be heard at all, and even then, their understanding is sadly limited.

Ceinwen was very, very good at making herself clear to the humans around her. Most, and Madog included himself, had no inkling that she was

doing it until after it was done. Whatever she wanted, they did, as if it had been their intention all along.

That was humiliating enough, but Madog had met horses like that before. What he had not met was a horse who decided she was going somewhere, and went there by the most direct of all possible—and impossible—ways.

He could be imagining it. He might have miscalculated the distance after all.

There was only one way to be sure. He had to test it.

oOo

In the clear and rain-washed morning, Ceinwen was fresh and eager to go, and Madog had a crashing headache. He had drunk too much of the innkeeper's ale. His voice was in fine condition as a result, but the rest of him left much to be desired.

Once he was in the saddle with the wind in his face, his spirits improved. He took the winding way out of the valley, but as he reached the hilltop, the rising sun at his back made a track ahead of him, a shaft of clear light, wide and perfectly straight.

He had not seen the sun do such a thing on land before, only on water. Ceinwen trotted forward with perfect aplomb, as if a road made of light was as ordinary as one made of paving stones.

He should think about where he wanted to go, she let him know. She would be happy with anywhere that had good grass and clean water. He might, being human, want something slightly different.

He knew a place, but it was on the far side of Gwynedd. He had made a song about it, which wound through his head while he rode.

The track clove through green hills and a wood bright green with spring. The light on them was clearer than Madog had known light could be. It made him think of music, of the harp's note that rings long after the plucking of the string, and the singer's voice winding through the infinite variations of a single phrase.

He knew where he had to be. There was a world beyond the one he lived in, a world of immortal magic, of perilous beauty and deadly sweetness.

Some said the dead lived out new lives here; others that nothing mortal could long survive among beings so old and so powerful that they beggared human understanding.

Madog drew rein. Ceinwen consented to halt.

They had come beneath the boughs of the wood. In the dappled green light, he saw shapes that owed nothing to earthly logic. Things flitted through the branches and danced in the air. Voices whispered, murmured, sang.

It was a simple melody, too faint and distant to catch the words. Its beauty tugged at his heart. He shortened rein, meaning to turn Ceinwen toward it, but she clamped the bit in her teeth. She would not go.

The road was safe, she let him know. But if he left it, even she might be hard put to protect him.

“What *are* you?” he demanded of her. “Are you a horse at all?”

She laid her ears back. Of course she was a horse. What else would she be?

“Horses don’t do this,” he said.

She did. She shook from head to tail, rattling his teeth in his skull, and trotted forward. Her trot when she took the trouble was smooth to ride. She was not, just then, in a mood to spare him.

His first inclination was to wrestle her down to a walk, but some vestige of sense warned him not to try. He jolted out words instead. “All *right*! Stop! I believe you. You’re a horse. Who can walk the roads through Faerie.”

Straight tracks, Ceinwen informed him as she finally deigned to slow to a walk. She knew where they all were, where they led and how to make them go where she wanted them to go. It was born in her the way running was born in some of her idiot cousins. She just naturally knew.

“Is your mother like you?” Madog asked. “Or your father?”

Ceinwen’s ear-flick was a shrug. She was growing bored with this line of conversation. She was what she was. She neither knew nor cared if anyone else was like her.

That was not useful, but it was all the answer he was going to get from her.

She had to keep the road in her head in order to follow it, and he should do that, too, because it was his song that was leading her. For a hideous instant it went clean out of his head, and the road changed. The light darkened. The things in the branches lost their benign aspect; their fangs were sharp and long, and their eyes measured the tracks of his veins, lusting for blood.

He wrenched himself back into focus. The song was where he had left it, floating in his head. He tethered it tightly to his consciousness.

The wood opened into plain and simple earthly light. It was the most beautiful thing in any world, and the most blessed. Ceinwen cantered into the green meadow, toward the well and the ruined shrine.

Maybe he had not chosen so well after all. There was old magic here, where a web of straight tracks met and then parted.

Ceinwen snatched the reins from his hands and dropped her head to graze. He knew he should object to that, but he had too much to think of.

He was sitting on a wonder of the world. It could make him rich; it could give him power, if he learned how to use it. He need never wander earthly roads again, or sing for his supper.

A general could move his army from one end of the kingdom to the other in a night, and win the war before his enemy even knew he was there. A merchant could trade earthly gold for gems of Faerie, and bring back marvels that would awe the courts of kings. A bard...a bard might learn songs such as folk of earth had never heard, and master modes of music that he had only dimly dreamed of.

Madog was a bard. That was all he had ever wanted to be, and he was good at it. Good enough, patrons in plenty had told him, to match any in Gwynedd or in Dyfed, and as for the rest of the island, what did they know of music at all?

What would they think in Faerie, if he came and asked to sing for them, and then to learn the songs they sang?

That was a ridiculous thought. Madog was going to the gathering of the bards in Aber, where the prize this year was a silver torque and a white heifer. He had no use for a heifer, but he might sell her for silver that he could well use.

He would win her, too. He knew how good he was.

Good enough to sing in Faerie?

“Tell me I’m mad,” he said to Ceinwen.

Ceinwen was deep in the bliss of sweet green grass. The only thought she had to spare for him had to do with a bowl of barley come evening, and a good rubbing down. She was hot under the saddle, and she itched.

“Do they have barley in Faerie?” he asked.

That got her attention, and an answer, too. They had better than barley there. They had oats as sweet as cream, and clover, and honey cakes that the Fair Folk loved to feed to one who could walk between worlds.

Madog shook his head. He was dizzy with the craziness of it all. To ride from world to world. To sing in the courts of Faerie.

Well, he thought. Why not? It was a month yet until the gathering of the bards. What better way or place to hone his craft?

That supposed of course that the old songs were false, or exaggerated. A single night on the other side surely would not last a hundred years on this one. He had shortened his journey by a day before he even knew what Ceinwen was doing. He had come here to the far side of Gwynedd in half a morning, by the angle of the sun. The same morning, he was sure, as the one on which he had begun.

A bard went where the best songs were. Madog had heard one in Faerie that he wanted to hear again, and then to learn, and spin his own songs upon it. That was magic, he knew, and it might be the death of him. But he was a bard. He had to try.

He coaxed Ceinwen’s head up and ran his hand down the moon-colored silk of her neck. “Very well then. Oats as sweet as cream it is, and honey cakes. Tonight we’ll try our luck in Faerie.”

Turnabout

Deborah J. Ross

James looked up from the forest floor to see a strange man sitting on a nearby log. The man was dressed quite inappropriately in a doublet of blue velvet stitched with silver, and white hose, and he certainly hadn't been there a few minutes before.

"Who the hell are you?" James demanded. He didn't want anyone to see his tears, even if he had good cause for grief.

"Albrecht, at your service. I played around with a peasant girl, although I was engaged to someone else. When she found out, she died of a broken heart. Giselle, her name was. After she died, she turned into a Wili, but she never stopped loving me. She saved me from being danced to death. Why, I'll never understand," he said dispassionately. "I remember you—you're the Scot who ran off with a sylph girl on your wedding day. You killed her, didn't you? That makes us two of a kind."

James got to his feet, brushing shreds of moss from his kilt and lace-trimmed wedding shirt. "Be off before my gamekeeper comes after you. I've better things to do than bandy accusations with a madman."

"You'd better get used to it." Albrecht crossed his elegant legs. "Every season it's the same thing. Ballet audiences always insist on *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* and that thing with the mice—what was it? Ah, *The Nutcracker Suite*."

"I don't know what kind of game you're playing, but I won't tolerate such nonsense. Or else..." James said, half to himself, "or else my mind has cracked and I'm imagining all this...."

A tall man, fair as burnished bronze, stumbled into the clearing. Like Albrecht, he wore close-fitting, theatrical clothing. His face was ashen in the filtered green light.

“It’s no good!” he cried. “I’ve searched and searched, but there’s no way out. And the swans are all gone.”

“And who might this be?” James turned to Albrecht. “Your cell mate from Bedlam?”

The blond man thrust out a hand, friendly enough even though it trembled. “Siegfried at your service. I betrayed the Swan Maiden. I thought she was the magician’s daughter, or maybe it was the other way around. The two of them still confuse me! They’re danced by the same ballerina, you know.”

Albrecht said, “Every season we go through the same rigmarole. You look skeptical, my friend. Do you think *you* can go home again?”

Returning to his ancestral mansion was the last thing James wanted to do. The memories of his aborted wedding and the dreamy sylph he had loved and lost were still too fresh. He would much prefer to indulge his grief a little longer, but finding his way back now would prove how ridiculous Albrecht’s delusions were.

“I wouldn’t advise you to try it,” Albrecht continued. Was the man *smirking*? “Look at Siegfried. He’s been a shadow of his former self since the Wilis got a hold of him.”

Siegfried threw himself down on the log and buried his face in his hands. “It’s no use.”

“Is that all you have to say?” James snarled. “Buck up, man!”

“We’re doomed to suffer,” moaned Siegfried. James glared at him.

“You see?” said Albrecht.

“What’s the point of it all?” James shot back.

Albrecht leapt to his feet. “There never was any point, just a lot of nineteenth-century romanticism and an excuse to show off the *prima ballerina*. Who cares how the *danseur* feels?”

Siegfried moaned. “Guilt and gloom. Defeat and despair.”

“He’s right, you know,” Albrecht continued. “If there’s any point to human nature, it’s that life is suffering. We may stave it off for the sake of an orchestral interlude, but it all boils down to the same thing in the end.”

“And that is?”

“We’re *caricatures*, don’t you see? Handsome nobleman loves a dream and betrays her. Over and over again. That’s all—or are you still fooling yourself that your sylph is any different from my Giselle or Siggy’s bird-girl?”

“If I’m just somebody’s tragic hero, how can I feel such pain?” James said.

“Pain is everything,” was Siegfried’s opinion.

The stubborn pride of the Scots rose up in James. “There’s got to be something we can do!”

Albrecht returned to his place on the log, his face closed and set. “There’s no hope for us. We’re nothing but leftovers, the residue of energy and imagination from the dancers who portrayed us. We were created to prove that when you love something beautiful, you destroy it.”

“You are clean daft, the both of you!” James shook his head. “I don’t know what asylum you crawled out of, but I’ll have none of it! I may have made a mess of my life by chasing a butterfly maiden and letting my bride marry my rival, but it’s not over yet. Not for me.”

He started off in the most likely direction of his ancestral mansion.

Albrecht’s voice floated behind him. “You’ll be back....”

o0o

James had not gone very far when he realized that he had no idea where he was. He had lost his bearings during the last tormented flight of the sylph, poisoned by the scarf the witch had given him to win her back. He looked up, searching for a patch of sky with which to determine the position of the sun. Since he knew the time to be late afternoon, and he was also reasonably certain of the direction he had gone from the castle, he ought to be able to orient himself without a compass. It was a good thing he’d wasted no more time with those two lunatics.

The muted green light stretched on in all directions, with no hint of the sun. The forest lay as still as a mausoleum. As he went on, the shadows deepened into dusk.

James searched the forest floor for a trace of human passage, his ears straining for any sound of a hunt. How could the search parties have given up on him so soon?

A whisper in the dry leaves brought him alert, peering through the condensing gloom. The next moment, he wondered if he'd really heard anything at all.

Another rustle. This time, he could not be mistaken.

The shadows were noticeably thicker now. All brightness had vanished from the sky. Something flickered in the inky lace of an ash tree.

A white bird, caught in a trap?

No, it must be the twilight putting tricks into his eyes. There was nothing there.

"Stranger, why have you come to me?" The voice was eerily distorted, as if muffled by layers of shroud.

His skin crawled in an atavistic shiver as he turned around. A woman shimmered before him like a ghostly parody of his sunlight sylph. Swathed in the limpid stuff of clouds, her fragile wings quivered and her lips parted in a cadaveric rictus. "I ask you again, what would you have of me?"

James could not force his tongue to move.

"Albrecht sent you! Do not deny it!"

"No! He did his best to dissuade me. Are you his—I mean, a—"

"I was Giselle when I still lived," she answered with a tinge of sadness. "Afterwards...my love for Albrecht kept some human spark alive within me...for a little while." She stepped away from the ash tree and he saw her more clearly.

"It is not safe for mortal men to be abroad at this hour," Giselle hissed. Her teeth shone like small sharp pearls between blood-dark lips.

"I pray you, show me the way out of the forest." James forced bravery into his voice, although his hands trembled.

She shook her head.

"Please—"

"Don't beg! I can't bear it." She turned her face from him, eyes lowered. James saw traces of the human beauty that had once been hers. "There is no

way out. Not for you. Not for me.”

“There must be! I can’t have come too far from the castle, not on foot. Only this morning—”

“You don’t understand. There never has been an escape for you, any more than for my Albrecht. If there had been, if you had been truly free to choose, why would you have thrown away everything for a dream?” When he did not answer, she added, “Go back. Go back before the others come.”

Her voice held such a mixture of horror and pity that James hesitated for a moment before asking, “What others?”

“The Wilis. Myrthe and her gang. The souls of young girls who died from broken hearts when their lovers betrayed them. Did you think we were free, any more than you?” She wet her lips. “When we find men in our forest, we dance with them...to the death.”

“This isn’t real,” he protested, hearing the weakness in his own words. Whatever she was, this winged girl was not human. Not anymore. And if she were anything else, either he was indeed insane or else Albrecht was right....

“Fool!” Giselle stamped one delicate foot. “You stand and gape at your own doom! I cannot shield you as I did Albrecht. You are nothing to me.”

James took a step backwards. Giselle had disturbed him before, but now, as she quieted into deathly stillness and her eyes gleamed like rubies, now she eroded his certainty like a canker worm within a rose. Over her shoulder he spotted other eyes, pairs of them, reddish in the gloom. Needle fangs glimmered between her perfect, parted lips. She bore down on him, her breath like the stench of a charnel house.

“Y-you said you *dance* us to death,” he protested.

“And how do you think we keep you at it?” There was nothing left of her tattered humanity in her eyes. Her words came with an odd lisp.

Then she cried out in a high sweet voice, “Go quickly! I can hold them for only a moment! There is the path!”

James saw that there was indeed a route of escape from the closing circle of ghost-women. The slender umbilical cord would lead him back to the clearing in defeat. He imagined the other men standing as he stood now,

caught between the leering crimson eyes and the pounding fear in their own hearts.

What had been the cost of that escape? It had burned Albrecht into a bitter cinder of cynicism, had left Siegfried unnerved and maudlin.

And me? What will I become, if I run away?

Giselle fluttered closer, an expression of stark hunger on her face. James watched her approach. Something hardened within him. He spread his arms wide and stepped forward to embrace the Wilis.

“Dance!” Giselle hissed, her body as cold as steel against his. She raked the side of his neck with a razor fang. “Dance!”

“Dance! Dance!” echoed the ghost-women.

He jerked away, but she held him fast. She pushed him this way and that in a ghastly parody of a waltz. He stumbled, fighting to keep his balance. She came at him again, fangs gleaming wetly, and he swerved. She followed him as if they had rehearsed their steps together.

“Dance! Dance!”

He didn’t know how long he could keep this up, fighting and dancing. Already, blood soaked the front of his shirt. Would it be better to save his strength and just dance? Would it—

“Dance! Dance!”

“No.”

With an effort, he pulled away and turned to face them. He recognized Myrthe instantly—tall, leafy, a coil of tight power, Queen of the Wilis. “I am done with dancing.”

Myrthe stared at him with nightmare eyes. Wings fluttering, the Wilis drew closer, like a crowd of funereal moths.

Their teeth bit into him in a dozen pinpoints of golden pain. He closed his eyes, his ears filled with the fluttering of their impossible wings...

o0o

“Back again. What did I tell you?”

James looked up as Albrecht hooked a hand under his shoulder and helped him to sit up. James squinted in the muted green light of the

clearing. His vision swam, then steadied. He glanced down at the front of his wedding shirt. The fine lace and linen were clean, untainted by blood. He groaned.

“Your weakness is from the attack,” Albrecht said with the first touch of kindness yet. “It will pass.”

“I thought—I meant to end it all,” James admitted.

“So did I,” said Siegfried. “But I always woke up back here. Take a word of advice, my friend. You don’t want to cross the Wilis too often.”

“They drain more than blood,” Albrecht added.

“But she said—” James stammered, “dance to the death.”

“The Wilis make terrible threats because it is their nature to do so,” Albrecht observe, “just as it’s our nature to betray. Every time we’re performed, the dancer creates an image of us. It happens over and over again. With time, the image gains substance, and then a semblance of life.” His gesture encompassed all three of them. “We all *seem* to have memories of the events that make up our particular stories because they’re rehearsed and performed so often. But they’re just as unreal as we are.”

“Sometimes others make their way here,” Siegfried added. “A few seasons ago, three different companies did *Romeo and Juliet*, but the poor fellow couldn’t decide whether to dance, act, or sing his role. We haven’t seen a trace of him since then. Albrecht and I never go out of fashion.”

James thought for a moment. “You mean that if my story is no longer performed, if no dancer is creating me in his own mind, then I will cease to exist?”

“Until the next time *La Sylphide* becomes popular,” Albrecht said.

“What if—what if they changed the story, gave it a happy ending instead of a tragic one? What if I don’t betray my sylph but marry her instead?” James asked.

Albrecht’s laugh echoed through the forest like the bark of a hyena. Siegfried hung his head and moaned, “There’s never any hope.”

James felt his Scottish temper rise. “I don’t believe you. There must be a way to change our destiny.”

Albrecht sobered a little. "I don't see how. This clearing is our world, along with the glen of the Wilis."

"All you two do is sit around, making sarcastic comments and feeling sorry for yourselves," James said. "I'd rather take my chances with the Wilis. At least, I'll be doing something."

"You'll be sorry," said Siegfried. "Once or twice they get their teeth into you, you feel weak but nothing worse. After that, you'll start coming back without parts of yourself."

"How is that possible?" James rounded on the blond dancer. "I thought the Wilis were just like us, mere characters in a ballet."

"They are," said Albrecht, "or rather, they were. Once all they did with us was dance until we were like to die of boredom. Then a few years ago, someone did a ballet version of *Dracula* and the Wilis liked it so much, they've made parts of it permanent."

"Then...then we *aren't* locked into our roles!" James exclaimed. "If the Wilis can change, then so can we."

"Change into beings with substance and free will? Hardly!"

"We can give ourselves hope! If we can't avoid our suffering, at least we can make it mean something. Is that too much to ask?"

Albrecht shrugged and Siegfried looked as forlorn as ever. James forbore snorting in disgust as he left them.

o0o

James had an easier time making his way through the forest, perhaps because he no longer expected to find either the search party or the castle. As before, he noticed the gradual fading of light from the sky. This time, he welcomed it as a sign that he was nearing the territory of the Wilis. He forced his way through the underbrush toward the ash tree.

There she was, at the extreme edge of his vision, a flicker of gray as if some translucent sheep had grazed in the branches and left tatters of its cloudy wool.

James smiled, although his pulse beat erratically in his throat. "I'm back."

“You...” came the ghostly voice. “You’re not Albrecht. Where is he? Why does he not come to me?”

“I’m James, don’t you remember? I was here a little while ago. You tried to warn me, but I wouldn’t listen.”

Giselle stepped away from the tree, her tiny wings quivering. “There is no one for me but my love....” She looked down, her long lashes masking her empty eyes.

As yet, James could see no sign of Myrthe or the other Wilis. He still had a little time. “I want to get out of here. Will you help me?”

“There is the path,” she replied in a hollow voice.

“No, not back to the others. When I was here before, you and the others drew my blood. I ended up back in the clearing where I began. But I had to go through something to get there. A—a rift in time or space. I want to use that same passageway to find my source.”

“Source?” She looked up at him, and he noticed how quickly the night had fallen, the warning tinge of crimson rising in her eyes.

He gulped but went on determinedly. “The one who created me, who’s creating me now. The one whose imagination makes me what I am.” His words tumbled out, ringing with his impatience. “Have you no idea what I’m talking about?”

The red in Giselle’s eyes dimmed. “The creator...I do remember. Galina, I think, or Margot, or Natalia. I’m not sure. They’ve all blended together.”

“Yes! But how do I find mine? How do I reach him?”

“After we dance...the day breaks and we fade. There’s something before twilight begins again. I feel—I bring a little of her with me each time.”

It was all James could do to not seize the ghost-girl and shake the answers out of her. “*How?* How do I find him?”

She shrank back from the passion in his words. “I think that when we all bit you, it’s too much. It sends you right back...with no time to remember....”

“But if it were just one? Just you?”

“No!” She threw herself back into his arms and the silk of her hair brushed his neck. “You don’t know what you’re asking! I do not want to be

like that, not when I'm beginning to remember. That came later, the blood-lust. Let me forget it and be Giselle for just a little while longer."

James put his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her away. In the fading light, her eyes were huge and dark like the eyes of a wounded deer, her skin like shadowed porcelain. She faced him with a desperate, fragile dignity. No wonder Albrecht had loved her.

"It must be now," he said gently. "Before the others come."

Giselle nodded, brushing away a tear with the back of one small hand. "You'll forget me, just as I will forget you. Just as I forget everyone except my Albrecht. Ah! He never comes to my anymore!"

"The more fool he."

James pressed his lips to her forehead. Her skin was as cool and smooth as marble. She quivered and then grew still.

In a swift, feral movement, she sank her fangs into his neck. Her weight brought him to his knees, but she hung on, slashing and drinking. He struggled to draw breath, but the air turned as thick as blood in his lungs.

oOo

Pain reached him through the darkness, a pain that burned even as it stretched and flexed. The agony centered in his thighs, spreading like a cramp into his low back. Sight returned to him—daylight streaming through high windows, the battered gloss of the piano, the rosin-dulled wood floor.

"Once more, from the *adagio*," came a voice from somewhere behind him, a voice his muscles obeyed automatically. "And this time, try to remember that you're a self-centered, spoiled rotten aristocrat."

He found a kernel of unease and prodded it, whispering, *Think—what does this all mean?*

"Is something amiss, Mister Kenon?"

His muscles grew still, their torment easing. A new voice arose from the body that housed him. "This interpretation doesn't make sense. Look, we decided that *Sylphide* is about hope and idealism, the dreams that get kids off the street and into the studio, working their butts off, trying to make something of their lives. So if that's true—"

Yes, yes!

“Mis-ter Kenon, we are not running a school for misunderstood adolescents, however talented they may be. We are rehearsing a classical ballet. Or rather, I am. You are performing the choreography and characterization I set for you. Is that clear?”

Rebellion, like an old comrade, curled around his throat and found no words.

You have the right of it. Don't forget! he wailed into the darkness as it seized him again. *Don't give up!*

o0o

Some time later, another voice reached him, along with the click of heavy pottery and the smell of food. Female, friendly, against the backdrop of a crowded coffee shop.

“You're a space case today. Having more rehearsal problems?”

“That damned Orlovsky! He's got Great Choreographer on the brain. He treats me as if I was just out of company school and can't be trusted with an idea of my own.”

“*Sylphide?*” The face across the battered Formica table was tantalizingly familiar, and not a dancer. He knew her now, his sister.

He sipped his coffee. “I want to do something with the part, not just muck about on stage, showing off Seline's legs. James—that's the guy's name—he's not such a rat-fink as Orlovsky would have us believe. He's looking for something, and he has the guts to go after it even when it makes him look crazy. It isn't his fault things don't work out. At least, not entirely.”

If you only knew....

“Yeah, but what can you do, Andy? Re-choreograph the whole last scene on stage? Orlovsky would have your head on a platter.”

“I don't know. Honest, I don't. Besides, we open in two days. It's too late to change anything of importance.”

Don't give up, he whispered into the dancer's mind. *This, the stuff of dreams, is as real as the dust on the studio floor. Which would you rather*

die for?

o0o

Andrew realized with a start that Seline was counting under her breath again. It gave her expression a curious, distorted quality, and when she was in pain, as she was now from the ankle she'd wrenched in the Sunday matinee, her right eye tended to turn inward. The combination of moving lips and cross eyes unnerved him for a moment.

Seline's *Sleeping Beauty* was good this season, but her *Sylphide* was a marvel, light and precise, a delight to partner. She pirouetted, posed, and launched herself into a silken *grand jeté*, pantomiming a grab at the chiffon scarf he waved before her.

James—no, he was Andrew *dancing* James. Lord! He'd never gotten so wrapped up in a role before as to think he actually *was* the character. Technique and Orlovsky's damned interpretation were one thing, method acting was another. He must be even more stressed out than he realized. Sometimes he even imagined someone looking over his shoulder, gently nudging him, whispering in his hear, *No, not that way, this was how it fel....*

Seline caught her breath as the *pas du chat* brought her to land on her bad ankle. Andrew caught her waist and took more of her weight than usual for the *arabesque* sequence. She flashed him a smile of thanks behind her garish makeup. It dispelled any resemblance between the agonies of theatrical ballet and the romantic story of a Scots nobleman longing for his mythical sylph.

"Three—and—four—and—" Andrew could hear Seline now, and feel her fierce concentration. He wrapped her in the length of chiffon, and they were in the home stretch. She had only the death scene left, and then a brief appearance riding the wire contraption on her way to sylph-heaven and a double dose of naproxen. Seline trembled as the Velcro fastenings of her wings parted and Andrew dropped them to the floor.

Why are we doing this to ourselves? he wondered as the girls dancing the other sylphs made their entrance to flutter Seline offstage. *Years of struggle to deform our bodies enough to execute the techniques, and then what?*

Even as a *premier danseur* of a major company, Andrew's future was bitter politics like Orlovsky's ego, dancing through one injury after another for a few precious years, and then a lifetime of slender means and encroaching arthritis.

What for? echoed the insistent whisper in his head. James—now there was a guy who had really blown it—and what for? For some wisp of a fairy girl, not even a real woman. Was that the message of *La Sylphide*, that the real thing couldn't hold a candle to the illusion? If you reached for the dream, like the magic of the dance it turned into dust.

Andrew liked this last part of the solo, overdrawn and melodramatic as it was, as James staggered about the stage and finally collapsed. Seline watched from the wings, an old yellow shawl draped around her shoulders.

An insistent thought gnawed at him. *There must be more....*

Step—and—arabesque—hold it—and—

The music swelled and he gathered himself for the final leap and fall. He liked to elongate the movement so it felt like sailing through space in slow motion. His body arced up and out, straining against gravity.

Andrew's vision sharpened into focus on Seline's face. Amid the lines of strain and the exaggerated makeup, her eyes shone...they *shone* as if she were seeing something wondrous.

He spiraled through the controlled landing, and the orchestra sustained the last notes before the curtain. In that moment, he knew what Seline had seen—something he had created, which had also created him, had wrenched him from his lackluster roots, had seized his guts as well as his imagination and hurled him into a career in dance. Like a near-fatal disease, the vision had twisted him inside-out. Things were never the same again. There was no going back. That was why the ballet had to end *here* and not with James returning in defeat to his home. He, too, could never return to what he had been.

Yes! Whispered an ecstatic voice in his mind. *Ah, yes!*

The audience sat silent for an instant before exploding into applause. Seline ran to Andrew's side, covering her limp with consummate skill, and took his hand. The company assembled for their bows. Seline handed him a

rose from the bouquet presented to her. Andrew bowed grandly to her, as he always did. The applause sounded tinny, distant. Irrelevant.

The flesh is willing but weak, he thought, and we do the best we can. Yet it is the vision that leads us on, making us more than lumps of clay.

As the final curtain fell, it seemed to him that in some hidden forest of his soul, sunlight danced among the living branches.

Secrets Unveiled...

Alma Alexander's life has prepared her well for her existence as a teller of stories and creator of worlds. She was born in a country which no longer exists, on the banks of a river immortalized in song as something it never was; lived in a myriad exotic places, making friends with people whose language and whose dreams were strange to her, and learning how to breathe in an atmosphere of foreign air; finally found a husband in cyberspace, and made a home in the cedar woods of the Pacific Northwest, where she lives with that husband and two presumptuous cats.

Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff was born in California and raised in Nebraska. Her fascination with speculative fiction dates from the night her dad let her stay up late to watch *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Mom was furious. Dad was unrepentant. Maya slept with a nightlight until she was fifteen and developed a passion for things that came from outer space or went bump in the night. Maya lives in San Jose where she writes, performs, and records original and parody music with her husband Jeff, who has plumbed the depths of absurdity with a series of parody music videos, including the viral "Midichlorian Rhapsody". The song is included on their latest CD: *Grated Hits*. The couple has also produced three musical children: Alex, Kristine, and Amanda.

Brenda W. Clough lives in a cottage at the edge of a forest in Virginia, surrounded by bunnies, chipmunks, cats, deer, and birds

who do her housework. She maintains two or three separate secret identities to keep her crime fighting separate from the writing, the fiber arts, and the day job. She is the author of nine novels and many short stories.

Laura Anne Gilman has written so many bios in her life that she now no longer believes that she exists. A 100,000 ha'penny bounty has been issued for proof otherwise. To date, no one has claimed that bounty. And yet, somehow, she hits deadline, and the cats get fed. It's a miracle.

Sylvia Kelso is a native of North Queensland, Australia, and has been writing or telling stories for as long as she remembers. She lives in a house with a lot of trees in the garden, but no cats or dogs. She compensates for this by playing Celtic music on a penny whistle, and is now learning the fiddle as well.

Sue Lange was born under a bad sign. Soon after that she got her mojo working at the red house over yonder. But one stormy Monday she moved to Kansas City. When that turned into a ball and chain, she went on the road again. Unfortunately, though, the thrill was gone and everyday she had the blues. Things were looking up when she was approached by a sweet black angel. She began experimenting with the black magic woman, but wound up with a hellhound on her trail. After that it didn't take much for her to decide to simply let the good times roll. Ever since then she's been rollin' and tumblin' like the queen bee she was born to be. As the years go passing by she proves time and again she's simply stone crazy

Vonda N. McIntyre is the granddaughter of an M.D., Dr. David Yandell Keith, one of the first radiologists, and, as family legend (possibly myth) has it, the first person to apply X-ray technology to

equine medicine. This may make her a relative, in some convoluted way, of one of the editors of this anthology, Deborah J. Ross. Or possibly of Man o' War. Anything's possible in Elfleda's world.

Pati Nagle lives in a forest in the Land of Enchantment. She is visited daily by birds, squirrels, and bunnies. At night she listens to coyotes singing and watches the stars overhead. Writing fantasy is her dream come true. Her next fantasy novel, *Enchantment*, is scheduled for release in December 2011.

Irene Radford wanted to be a ballerina, but found she was too short. Then she tried becoming a Leprechaun and found she was too tall. Not enough arms and legs to become a spider weaving complex webs that catch the dew and shimmer in the dawn. Too skinny to be the fat lady in the circus and too fat to be a walking skeleton, she settled on being a writer who also makes lace.

Patricia Rice slept in a garret throughout her childhood, dreaming of witches and space aliens, until Prince Charming drove up in a '57 Ford and swept her to Never-Neverland, where she writes about dreams that come true to this day.

Madeleine E. Robins was raised by wolves on the windswept tundra of the Malagassy Republic. From a young age she hoped to be an astronaut, but chronic motion sickness put an end to this dream, and she turned to writing. She now lives in a castle on the edge of town and eats passing children for lunch.

Deborah J. Ross is the great-granddaughter of a Chasidic rabbi, and the honorary godmother of a Thoroughbred mare descended from Man o' War. She has never recovered from her hours in a sensory

deprivation tank at the Malibu ranch of John Lilly. That, she says, explains everything.

Judith Tarr's superpower is invisibility. She writes in invisible ink. She, and her fiction, can allegedly be seen in ultraviolet light. On the rare occasions when she is visible, she manifests as a fat white horse.

Sherwood Smith wanted to be an actress, but found early that she always got the wicked stepmother role. The one time she whined her way into the princess role at theater club, she reveled in her die-away airs and graces until the others asked with concern if her stomach was upset. From then on she *wrote* about wicked stepmothers, pickled princes, sword-swinging princesses, weird aliens, weirder humans, cosmic galaxies, and the Three Stooges. Her story in this volume was her attempt to play with myth

Not to be confused with Grendel's Dam, **Amy Sterling Casil** has so many girlfriends that the tale which follows was carried down through many different lines to today. For we must remember those who came before us, and remember their triumphs, terrors and tragedies lest they befall ourselves.

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Tales Newly Twisted

Edited by
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&
Phyllis Irene Radford

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